

# Defying the Odds

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## 1. You Ain't Getting Rid of Me That Easily

**\*\*Once upon a time there was a chick (let's call her yappichick) who wrote a Halo fic called Moving Forward for yuletide. She posted it and thought that was the last time she would ever write in that universe. Her muse, however, had different plans.\*\***

**\*\*This universe is based around the 2010 Happy Halodays card. The concept of the AU in a nutshell: most everyone (with the exception of Miranda Keyes) in the UNSC survived the events in the Halo trilogy and John and Cortana, along with Johnson and the Arbiter, make it back to Earth through the Portal in Halo 3.\*\***

**\*\*There are references to all of the games (of course), The Fall of Reach, Human Weakness (from Halo: Evolutions), and Halsey's journal (from the Halo: Reach Legendary Edition). The first chapter is copied almost word for word from my "Moving Forward" fic, so if it looks familiar that's why.\*\***

**\*\*A huge thanks to my Babe for betaing this sucker and my f-list for listening to be rant and panic and squee throughout the process. This story is complete and I'll be posting a chapter a day until all nineteen chapters are posted.\*\***

**\*\*One last note, this has absolutely nothing to do with my other crazy AU, "Under the Surface".\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>The party was over, the fire had nearly burnt itself out and everyone had left.<p>

Except Cortana and John.

She sat cross-legged, appearing to hover slightly over the holotank. She watched the Master Chief as he stared into the last remains of the fire. He silently swallowed the last gulp of beer before setting the mug on the ground next to his helmet.

Cortana knew something was bothering him.

During the Christmas party, John had been as social as she had ever known him to be, even going so far as to make conversation with Johnson and the Arbiter, but as their friends and colleagues started to leave, Cortana noticed a subtle shift in his mood. Once the last of the group left, Cortana didn't address the pensiveness that had settled over the Chief, knowing that he would talk to her when he was ready.

Finally, he turned away from the crackling fireplace and looked squarely at Cortana. "You've received new orders." There was a tinge of accusation in his voice.

He knew.

She hadn't expected for him to learn about her new assignment before she had the chance to tell her himself. "You found out about that, huh?" she asked, trying to keep her voice nonchalant.

"When were you going to tell me?" Though his voice was even and almost emotionless, his eyes were looking at her with a mixture of hurt and confusion.

She stood up and started walking in a tight circle. "Tomorrow morning. I wanted to give you one night away from the UNSC and their redeployments. But," she said as she stopped pacing, holding his gaze, "I would never leave without saying goodbye, John."

He flinched slightly. Whether it was because she used his given name or because he didn't want to say goodbye, Cortana didn't know.

"Doctor Halsey said that you're going to be deployed by the end of the week," he said, frowning slightly.

Of course it would have been the doctor who told John of her new orders, Cortana thought with a wave of annoyance. Couldn't she have given him one evening of peace?

Aloud, she spoke none of her frustration. "The UNSC is eager to start reterraforming glassed planets to try to boost morale. I can't say that I blame them," she said, shrugging slightly. "Reach is their first priority. They want me there to make sure that any sensitive material that somehow survived the attack doesn't fall into the wrong hands."

"I know," John replied. He shifted in the chair, turning away slightly from the AI. "I requested to be assigned on the \_Unto the Light\_."

Cortana raised her eyebrows. That was her ship. Quickly, she hacked

into the personnel assignment for the \_Light'\_s crew. Sure enough, John's request and Lord Hood's subsequent approval were there.

"But you hate deep space travel," she sputtered, still bewildered by this new information. "You just destroyed the Flood. You could choose any assignment you wanted."

"I did," he rumbled.

Suddenly the conversation had taken a turn that Cortana, despite her vast knowledge, had not been expecting. Surely she was reading into the Chief's words. "Is the rebuilding of Reach that important to you?" she asked, keeping her voice light.

He raised his right eyebrow, as though he was surprised by her coyness. "You know why I requested this assignment, Cortana," he chided softly, turning back to face her.

Cortana was taken aback by his directness. Maybe it was the alcohol talking, maybe it was the release of emotions after being repressed throughout the Halo campaign, maybe it was the simple fact that his helmet was off, but she couldn't remember a time that John had ever been so forthright with her.

Yes, she knew his reason for deciding to volunteer to serve on the \_Light\_, but there was a part of Cortana that wanted-no, \_needed\_-to hear the words directly from the man sitting in front of her. "Tell me," she whispered, not wanting to break the thick yet not unwelcome tension that had settled over the room.

There was a long pause as he considered her words. So much time had passed that Cortana thought he had decided not to acknowledge her request.

She looked at his eyes, noticing the swirl of emotions running through them. His jaw clinched several times before he finally spoke. "I'd miss you."

They weren't the exact words Cortana had wanted to hear, but it was the closest to a heartfelt confession she would likely ever get from the Spartan.

She took a step closer to him. "I'd miss you too," she replied softly.

And, if she was honest with herself, it was that simple fact that had kept her from telling John about her new orders as soon as she had been given them. After he had gone to \_High Charity\_ and rescued her from the edge of the abyss, from the clutches of the Gravemind, it was nearly impossible for her to imagine performing any mission without John at her side.

She longed to reach out and touch him, but knew it was impossible. No, the only thing Cortana could offer John was an intangible yet unshakable companionship.

It was enough for the both of them for now, Cortana decided as she noticed his eyes soften at her declaration.

She cracked a smile, easing away from the tension. "I guess that

means you'll be keeping me busy while I try to keep you out of trouble." She sighed dramatically.

He flashed a rare grin at her. "Funny," he replied dryly. "I was thinking the same thing about you." He stood up and grabbed his helmet off the ground. "The next time you get a new assignment--"

"I'll tell you. I promise," she quickly assured him.

He nodded, pleased. "Good night, Cortana."

"Good night, John."

## 2. Denial Isn't Just a River in Egypt

It had to be wrong.

Catherine turned away from the data streaming in from the latest analysis on the AI, wishing there was some way the information was incorrect, but knowing the undeniable truth.

Cortana was dying.

The doctor shouldn't have been surprised at the data, but when the report came back that Cortana was running at a eighty-six percent data saturation rate, she couldn't help but to feel taken aback.

She and Cortana knew the amount of data the AI had amassed on the Halo ring had cut her lifespan in half. Her time on High Charity with the Gravemind had taken her to the brink of rampancy.  
>Cortana, who had somehow held on throughout the relentless attack of the Gravemind, had managed to remain "alive" until John was able to find her. To this day, Catherine couldn't explain how John's presence alone was enough for Cortana to shrug off the early bonds of rampancy, but it was. Catherine privately admitted to herself that it was John's luck showing itself again.<p>

When they arrived back on Earth, surviving the crash landing of In Amber Clad in the Indian Ocean, Cortana had been upfront with what her time with the Gravemind had done to her, how she hadn't been able completely to thwart the advances of the Gravemind and had "unleashed damnation on the stars". Lord Hood had dismissed her confession immediately; it was her solution that led to the destruction of Truth, the Gravemind and the disbanding of the Covenant. In Terrence's mind, that absolved Cortana of any wrongdoing.

Though the admiral had allowed for one night of celebration, there was still work to be done. After the devastation over the past several months, Terrence wanted to send a message to the UNSC that recovery was on its way.

Reach was his first order of business. The planet was still mostly glassed; it would take decades for the land to be restored. But there was the small area where the Forerunner artifact was found that had remained unscathed by the Covenant. And that's where Cortana came into the picture.

Though Catherine was sure all of the important data had been

destroyed in her lab, the one place that the exposed caverns led to, High Command wanted someone-Cortana, specifically-there to upload any data that remained in the system. Despite the fact that the Covenant had been dispersed, the UNSC was under no disillusionment at the trouble renegade Brutes and rebel humans from other colonies could cause if there was sensitive data still on the planet. The command had been issued and Cortana had been assigned to Unto the Light.

Catherine knew that the AI's pride wouldn't allow her to voice her concerns about her system's saturation levels to High Command. Cortana was proud and reckless, a dangerous combination if left unchecked. So Catherine had done the only thing she could think of doing under the circumstances: she told John about the AI's impending orders.

She didn't tell him her reason for concern, however; she valued Cortana's privacy too much. When she told him about Cortana's new assignment, his reaction was different than she expected. He seemed almost disconcerted.

"I'd like to request permission to serve on the Unto the Light."

Catherine had been taken aback. John hated deep space travel. He, along with the rest of her Spartans, preferred to be on solid ground, where they could better control their situation.

No, she quickly realized, his request had nothing to do with himself and everything to do with the AI he had been partnered with before the Halo campaign.

She didn't know how to process that bit of information.

John's request had been granted, of course. Terrence wouldn't have blocked any request John made after what he had done during the Halo campaign. When she had offered to pass along news of his assignment to Cortana, she had been politely, but firmly, refused by the Spartan. He wanted to talk to Cortana himself, he had said.

Catherine had allowed herself a slight reprieve from the concern she had for the AI. Everything would be fine, she had thought.

But now, after reviewing the final data analysis from Cortana's matrix before the mission, Catherine knew she shouldn't, she couldn't, allow the AI to continue with her mission as originally intended.

The news would be as painful for Cortana's pride as it was her own. The AI was, in many ways, a direct reflection of herself. But she wasn't doing Cortana a favor by keeping the information from her. She had already sent to the report to Terrence earlier in the morning.

Now she just needed to tell Cortana herself.

She turned towards the AI who was busy cataloguing battle reports from the past four weeks. "There has been a change in the mission." Her voice revealed none of the inner turmoil she felt.

Cortana whipped around and faced Halsey, scowling. "What are you talking about?" she asked, putting her hand on her hip.

The doctor didn't answer Cortana's question right away. She knew how Cortana thought, how she felt. No matter how she answered the question, it would be undoubtedly difficult for the AI to accept.

"Doctor?" prompted Cortana.

"Your data saturation levels are too high. They're-" she hesitated, then corrected herself. After everything that Cortana had done, she owed her that much honesty. "I'm not sure your data pathways could handle any more significant data accumulation."

She expected Cortana to fight, argue, do something other than what she did: nod slowly and close her eyes briefly. "Who's my replacement?" she asked, her jaw jutting forward. If Catherine didn't know it was impossible, she would have thought Cortana was fighting back tears.

Catherine studied her most important creation momentarily. She looked tired. Obviously her time with the Gravemind had affected her more than Catherine originally believed.

When the doctor didn't answer right away, Cortana huffed. "It's another woman, isn't it? Did you let him choose this time? Maybe someone who doesn't think like a civilian?"

Catherine's gut tightened at Cortana's words.

She knew that John had reported having what was being dubbed as a "Cortana moment" on High Charity. There, he claimed, Cortana identified herself as CTN-0452-9, but instead of being her familiar blue-purple color, she had turned a sickly green.

The color of rampancy.

When he had found her, he claimed she had shown no signs of being abnormal, that her demeanor had been as it always had been, but Catherine knew-and feared-the truth: that Cortana was further along the rampancy process than anyone wanted to admit.

Cortana was as much the hero in the Halo campaign as John was. To think that she was so close to death was almost unthinkable, especially so soon after the war has ended.

But there was no doubt in Catherine's mind that Cortana's question was tinged with Jealousy. Perhaps, she thought with a small frown, she wouldn't be able to implement her plan after all.

Immediately, she was ashamed. Cortana had proven time and again that she was not to be underestimated.

Still, Catherine knew that the plan she had come up with to try save Cortana from falling into the abyss of rampancy might prove too much for the AI.

"No one is replacing you," she assured her. "And, if John had a

choice, he would choose you. He already did," she reminded the AI pointedly.

Cortana had the decency to look chastised. "Yes, he did. I-" She stopped and shook her head. Catherine watched as she pushed whatever emotions were swirling through her matrices away and took a deep breath. "I take it that you have a plan."

The doctor relaxed slightly. This was the Cortana she was accustomed to dealing with. "Your assumption would be correct." She pulled up the encrypted file for Cortana to review. "The Resurrection Protocol."

Her eyes got a far away look as she accessed the file. "More like the Suicide Protocol." She looked at Halsey accusingly. "You're serious?"

Cortana had been right in her assessment that the procedure was risky; Catherine hypothesized that there was only a three percent chance that all data would be salvaged. But, even if there was some data degradation, Cortana would have a chance that very few smart AIs ever had: a long life.

"Have you thought of another solution?" she volleyed.

"No." Cortana's admittance echoed throughout the lab. Catherine wondered if it was as awkward for Cortana to say the word as it was to hear it.

She was more convinced than before that this needed to be done if Cortana was to survive. "I understand this is difficult-"

"You're asking me to transfer my data to a storage buffer while you attempt to transfer my core processing to another matrix chip," interjected Cortana. "Did you forget that the quantum transfer cascade will be transferred to the new chip?"

"Not if the algorithm you found in Mendicant Bias's programming can be used," Halsey countered.

"It's still a long shot," argued Cortana. She sighed as she ran a hand through her hair "It might not be worth it."

Catherine amended her earlier assessment of Cortana. Cortana wasn't tired. Cortana was giving in. And that didn't settle well with the doctor.

"Have you lost your tenacity?" Catherine challenged, stepping close to the AI. "Did the Gravemind break you?"

Her questions produced the desired response. Cortana's eyes narrowed. "No, he didn't."

"Then act like it," Catherine retorted. "I have every reason to believe with this algorithm that you will be able to reach metastability. But..."

"ONI and High Command want me to complete my mission on Reach before you do anything," Cortana finished for her.

Catherine nodded. Though ONI reluctantly agreed to let her attempt to graft the algorithm to Cortana's core processing, they had been insistent that her work would be done after the data upload on Reach. There were only six smart AIs in the UNSC and only Cortana had been stationed on Reach. Her knowledge would be invaluable to allow her to purge all classified data that survived the attack.

If she survived, then Catherine's proposal was to proceed.

"Which means I'll be coming with you on the Light," the doctor said. She held up a hand at Cortana's protest. "Reach might be Terrence's first priority, but you are mine." She softened her voice slightly. "You will overcome this."

She watched as the AI considered her words before she slowly nodded. "Have you told John?"

Catherine raised her eyebrows. "After the earful you gave me about informing him of your assignment?" She shook her head. "I thought I'd leave that to you."

"Thank you," the AI said sincerely.

Catherine tapped several keys on her computer. "I can find his location if you want..."

Cortana shook her head, dismissing her offer. "Don't worry about it, Doctor, I have a good idea where he is."

Then, she was gone.

### 3. And You Thought Your Day Was Bad?

**\*\*A cold knocked me out for a few days, but I'm back with a new chapter. Enjoy!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>She knew she would find him here.<p>

Cortana watched from a distance as John stood on the outskirts of New Momosa. The damage to the city had been severe; the closest working holotank was several hundred yards away from the Chief's position. She had no doubt he was thinking about those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice in the fight against the Covenant. Johnson, Captain Keyes, Doctor Halsey and a handful of Spartans -including most of Noble Team-had managed to survive everything that had happened since the attack on Reach, but there were millions of people who hadn't been so lucky.

He stood rigidly at the ruins, paying his silent respect to those who had paid the ultimate price. Cortana was content to let him grieve without interruption; she wasn't particularly eager to share Halsey's assessment with John.

She had always known her life was going to be pitifully short compared to her human counterparts. The Gravemind had constantly taunted her with that reality, that weakness, knowing there was nothing she could do about it. Not even she, with her vast intellect,



could figure out a way to counteract her fate. Cortana had managed to make a temporary peace with her mortality on that damned ship, when she thought John wasn't coming back to her and the only satisfaction she had was knowing that the knowledge of the index would die with her.

But then, John \_had \_come and she had felt a false burst of life run through her. She had foolishly allowed herself to believe that the presence of one human, her human, would allow her to circumvent her fate. The pressing demands to activate the Index, combined with her relief that John did, in fact, keep his promise to her, had distracted her enough to ignore what was an undeniable fact: she was rampant.

Now that she was back on Earth, she couldn't hide from the reality of the facts. Halsey had pulled up the latest analysis on her matrix. \_She was dying.\_

She knew Halsey's plan was a long shot at best and that, more than likely, her trip to Reach would be her last mission. As the threat of nearly uncontrollable thoughts bombarded her data pathways-\_Why should I be the one who dies after three years? I have more knowledge in my core processes than most humans learn in a century. I deserve to live longer. Halsey should have never given me the emotions\_- , Cortana forced herself to push the unwanted, and unproductive, thoughts away.

She had been instrumental in keeping humanity safe from the Covenant and the Flood. She had completed her primary objective she reminded herself. She had lived a good life.

\_Then why I am so bitter?\_

Her thoughts were interrupted when her sensors detected movement: John was coming.

She knew exactly when he noticed her. He began walking 3.9 percent faster, his heart rate elevated slightly, his serotonin levels had spiked. He was, according to Cortana's analysis, glad to see her.

It was too bad that his happiness wouldn't last, Cortana thought with a slight frown.

He slowed down as he approached the holotank, tilting his head slightly to the right.

He wanted to know why she was here.

"We need to talk, John." She knew the rare use of his first name would immediately put him on alert. As expected, his adrenaline levels spiked.

"What is it?" There were no traces of joy in his voice.

There would be no easy way to tell him. Cortana knew he would take her death as hard as he had his Spartan brothers and sisters.

She sat down, bending the light so it seemed as if her legs were swinging over the edge of the holotank. "You know that smart AI's have a rather...short lifespan. That the average length a smart AI is

functional is seven years."

"Yes." She could almost hear him mentally calculating how much time he thought she had left to live.

She swung her legs and frowned slightly. "Sometimes, though, an AI's life can be significantly shorter. If she accumulates a large amount of data from a Forerunner structure or devours information from a ten thousand year parasite, then her lifespan becomes a fraction of that."

"How much time do you have?"

She shouldn't have been surprised at his direct question. She recognized that tone of voice; he was preparing himself for the bad news.

\_I'm so sorry for hurting you, John.\_

No sooner than she had thought it, she resented thinking it. Why was she apologizing to him? \_He \_left her in the control center on the Halo ring. \_He \_left her on High Charity. \_He \_should have known what all that data was going to do to her neural pathways.

He knelt down in front of her, allowing her to see her distorted image in his visor's reflection. "Cortana?"

It was his concern tinged with fear that pulled her back from the edge of Jealous thoughts. If she was going to make it through the Reach mission, she needed to control her emotions. Immediately, she spun off a subroutine that would limit her emotional output.

Instantaneously, she felt the low-key sensation that she often associated with being in a system with a limited power supply. Her emotions were still there, she noted, but they were much less distracting than they were before. Perhaps her final mission would be a success after all.

She looked up at John who was still waiting for her response. She drew in a long breath before speaking. "According to Doctor Halsey's projections, if my systems remain in their current state, Reach will be my last mission."

He stiffened at her words. "What do \_you \_say?"

A faint smile danced across her lips. They had come far in their relationship if he was willing to listen to Cortana over the doctor. "I agree with her analysis." She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. "I should have been dead, Chief. When I was on \_High Charity\_..."

He didn't let her finish her thought. "How do we reverse the process?"

Cortana smiled wryly. Only a Spartan would look at an impossible situation and attempt to find a solution. "Doctor Halsey has an idea, but I'm not as optimistic as she is about its success."

"But there is a chance."

She nodded. "A small one."

"That's enough."

She looked at him wistfully. "Not all of us have an uncanny luck about them, Chief."

#### 4. Anger Management: Spartan Style

The rumors about Cortana were already swirling around the base. In the course of three hours, Johnson had heard everything from the fact that the AI had already succumbed to rampancy to the idea that she had attempted an attack on Doctor Halsey resulting in ONI permanently disabling her. The sergeant didn't believe everything he had heard. He knew that the soldiers around base suddenly had too much time on their hands without the threat of a Covenant or Flood invasion and the best way to get through a long shift of patrolling was to pass along the gossip of the day.

But, based on all of the talk, he knew something had been discovered about Cortana since they arrived back on Earth. He thought back to her behavior after the Chief rescued her from High Charity. There hadn't been any outward signs that something was wrong with her. She might have been a bit more reserved after spending all that time on the damned ship, but she still had her sarcastic spunk that the sergeant associated with her.

Johnson would have contacted Cortana directly to ask about her condition if she hadn't been in a classified meeting with High Command and ONI all day. It seemed as though he was going to have to get his information through another source.

A certain Spartan came to mind.

Johnson found him at the firing range. He watched the Spartan for several minutes. The Chief made easy work of the holographic targets the computer had set up for him, but it was no simple task; Johnson knew that it was on the most difficult setting.

Yup, the sergeant decided, something was definitely wrong with Cortana.

He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigar. With a quick flick from his lighter, he lit the stogy and made his way to the Chief's position.

As the Chief finished his last round of targets, Johnson leaned against the edge of the table. When the Spartan turned around, he took in Johnson's appearance silently. He appeared completely indifferent, his emotions carefully hidden behind his visor, but Johnson suspected that he was far from the pillar of strength he appeared to be. The Chief set down his pistol next to Johnson, neither inviting him to stay or asking him to leave.

So, it's gonna to be up to me to start the conversation, Johnson mused.

He nodded in the direction where the targets once were. "I haven't

since you this pissed off since Tinkerbelle tried killing me on that half-assed Halo ring," he started, nodding towards the pile of empty clips.

When the Chief had put together the fact that Guilty Spark wasn't going to take the destruction of "his" installation, he wasted no time in firing a shot at the Monitor's casing just as he was unleashing his attack on the unsuspecting sergeant. The bullet had caused Spark's aim to be off, allowing Johnson to be injured, but not killed, by the blast. Johnson had been dazed and confused for several minutes after the attack, only able to watch the Chief sprint across the room to pick up his fallen Spartan laser and destroy the Monitor.

Unable to walk, he had handed the Chief the matrix chip which held Cortana and followed his movements across the room. When she had activated her avatar at the control panel, she flashed a look at Johnson and smirked, "He should have known not to mess with the Chief's friends. He tends to get possessive of them."

He had huffed a laugh and said, "Is that why the crazy fool offered to go on High Charity alone to find you?"

He had sworn she flashed pink briefly before turning her usual cool blue shade. "No, he did that because he had a promise to keep."

Johnson had been unable to press her any further. She had activated the Index and the room had started to collapse around them. The Chief had scooped him off the ground as the Arbiter took point and they escaped the building.

The sergeant stopped his trip down memory lane when he saw the Chief beginning to move away. He wasn't willing to let the conversation be over so soon. He prodded, "Are the rumors around the base true? Is Cortana really dying?"

It was nearly imperceptible, but Johnson didn't miss the slight flinch. "Doctor Halsey has a plan to help her reach metastability," he evaded.

Johnson was far from one of the tech heads sitting at a desk in the ONI office, but even he knew what that would mean for the AI. He took a long drag on his cigar before asking, "Think it will work?"

"I don't know." The finality in the Chief's voice let Johnson know that he did not want to talk about Cortana anymore. The Spartan grabbed an assault rifle and turned back to the newly set up targets.

Not in a talking mood, eh? That's just too damn bad.

The Chief needed a bit of an intervention, Johnson decided. He needed hope and a reminder that all of life's problems weren't solved with bullets. Even if they were rather effective.

"She's not dead yet, Chief."

That caused the Spartan to turn around and look at Johnson. The sergeant stubbed his cigar on the ground before pinning the Chief

with a stare. "You're forgetting the fact that she is almost as stubborn as you are. Just remember, she did manage to keep the Index protected until you managed to get back to High Charity and save her from that overgrown fungus. If there is an AI who is going to get past rampancy, you can bet all your shiny medals, it's gonna be her."

Johnson waited as the Chief considered his words. It was almost impossible to tell what the man in front of him was thinking, but Johnson was pretty damn sure his words meant something to the Spartan.

He cocked his head slightly to the left, appraising Johnson. Finally, the Spartan nodded. "Cortana will make it."

"Damn right she will," he said, clasping the Chief on the shoulder briefly. "Now, set me up a round of targets and I'll show you a Marine gets things done."

## 5. Who's Driving This Thing Anyway?

**\*\*Back on our regularly scheduled chapter. As always, I'd love to know what you think. :D\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>The mission was moving along smoothly.<p>

That fact alone would have normally put Cortana on alert. Chaos and instability had been her constant companions since the attack on Reach. She should have been running security scans of the nearby systems to make sure there were no surprises waiting for them during their trip.

Instead of being proactive, Cortana relished in the simplicity of the mission. The quietness of the ship's systems being in an active, but normal, state provided her short-term relief from the tasks she didn't necessarily want to do. Tasks that she had once considered menial had become burdensome.

She ignored the reality as best she could; she made herself do low priority routines, acting the part of taking a more active role in running the Light's systems.

It seemed that without the threat of John's -and humanity's- demise, Cortana found herself unable to counter the pull of rampancy.

Not that she would ever reveal her fatigue to anyone on the Unto the Light, not even John or Halsey. She had a mission to complete. Even if the trip to Reach was, in fact, her last mission, she was going to make sure it was successful as any other objective she had completed during the Halo campaign.

Despite her bravado, she knew the crew knew of her deteriorating condition. Rumors on a ship as small as the Light tended to move quickly. There was absolutely no way she would add fuel to the rumor mill.

She started an active scan of the ship's communication grid when

Captain Keyes walked onto the bridge, pipe in hand. "I keep waiting for some Covenant ship to come out of nowhere and try to blow us out of the sky." He looked squarely at Cortana. "What's our status?"

Terabytes of information came flooding into her system at his inquiry. She felt a wave of satisfaction as the influx of information was assimilated by her matrix without any issues. "We'll arrive at Reach in eleven hours, right on schedule."

"And the mission?"

She pulled up the data from the beacon she had dropped over Reach during the rescue mission after the first Halo campaign. "Still green, sir. Several ships had fallen into deteriorating orbits and have been destroyed during their reentry into the atmosphere, but the opening to the caverns is still accessible."

"Thank you Cortana."

His voice showed no evidence of concern, but Cortana didn't miss the fact that he studied her for nearly a second longer than he did before he found out about her condition. She frowned as a wave of annoyance washed over her.

Were the last days of her life to be spent as though she was senile? That she couldn't be trusted?

Her jaw jutted forward, her mouth open to confront the captain on his conduct.

Before the irritation could evolve into something potentially more dangerous, she felt the subroutine she created on Earth kick in. Her anger was muted as her subroutine rushed into remind her that had she been in the same position as the captain, she would be just as cautious.

It made sense logically, but that didn't mean she had to like it though.

She put her hand on her hip and turned away from Keyes. John was watching the entire exchange from his position in the back of the bridge. She opened their private comm channel.

"I didn't say anything," she defended herself.

He cocked his head slightly in her direction. "\_I know you didn't\_."

"I could have though." She crossed her arms. "I wanted to."

"\_He's concerned about you.\_"

We all are.

Cortana heard his unspoken words. She could really care less about the others on the \_Light\_'s crew, with the exception of a select few. If her pride could move out of the way, she might be able to allow herself the humility of appreciating their care.

"I'm doing alright, Chief." Though his face was hidden by his visor, she could almost see his disbelieving frown. "Really. I just wish people would stop treating me like I'm helpless."

"\_No one thinks that\_, " he countered.

She raised an eyebrow. "I think your faith in me is stronger than the crew's. I \_can \_hear every conversation on the ship at one time, remember?"

"\_I know-\_"

"Hold that thought, Chief."

Cortana shifted her attention to an unusual data signature that entered into the \_Light\_'s systems. She deactivated her avatar and focused her attention on the rogue data cluster. She weaved through the familiar data pathways of the Light. Binary code whizzed by her as she pursued the invader.

"\_Cortana, what are you doing?\_"

She didn't miss the concern in Halsey's voice. \_Don't worry, Doctor, I'm not about to succumb to rampancy yet. \_

"An unknown data cluster is in the system, Doctor. I'm just making sure it doesn't do anything to delay the mission to Reach." John would be proud. She had managed to suppress the urge to chide Halsey for checking up on her.

Three seconds passed with no response from the doctor. She was undoubtedly checking the validity of Cortana's claim.

Cortana didn't stop her pursuit. While Halsey ran a scan, Cortana dug further into the \_Light\_'s system. Whatever this was, it knew the UNSC's systems extremely well. It was maneuvering throughout the Light's subroutines effortlessly.

"\_I'm not detecting anything unusual, Cortana.\_"

The doctor's skepticism was not missed by the AI. Cortana, however, did not have the energy to argue with Halsey. It was taking all of her concentration to keep up with this infiltrator. "Run a level three security scan on subsystem 24-alpha."

As Cortana slid through the system, she knew that she was chasing some sort of advanced AI. Its data signature was too encrypted for Cortana to decipher immediately. Ignoring the fact that she was pushing herself too hard, she commanded several subroutines to crack the AI's encryption as she focused on what system this AI wanted to reach.

Finally, she determined its destination: the \_Light\_'s navigation systems. Cortana created several million firewalls and terabytes of redundant data to slow its progress. She initiated a full lockdown of all other ship systems. This AI wasn't going to be able to access any of the other systems if she had anything to say about it.

"\_You were right.\_" Halsey's voice cut into Cortana's matrix. "\_I see you have already implemented lockdown protocol.\_"

"I'm not sure it will even work," admitted Cortana. "Whatever this AI is, it knows the UNSC systems nearly as well as I do."

The implications of her statement were clear: this was no reduplicated Covenant AI like what she had found on the \_Ascendant Justice\_. An AI with as much knowledge as Cortana meant that it was, more than likely, Forerunner.

She wondered how and why a Forerunner AI would be targeting their ship when it should have disposal of all the Forerunner technology at its fingertips. The \_Light\_ was war torn and tired.

She pushed forward and nearly overtook the AI. As she started to access its contents, a horrific and impossible sight flooded her matrices.

It was the Gravemind.

Did you think I was going to be so easily defeated?

She froze her pursuit of the AI. As she could see, could hear, could feel was that...thing.

But it was dead. It died when they activated the incomplete Halo ring. Her solution had worked!

Dread and despair seeped through her. She had been wrong. Somehow, it had escaped its fate and was pursuing them. He must have taken over an AI, just like he tried to overtake her when she was on High Charity. The Gravemind had infiltrated the system.

And now John, Halsey, Keyes, Johnson and the rest of the \_Light\_'s crew were going to die at the hands of this beast because she hadn't been quick enough to stop it. Her sluggishness due to her rampancy was going to be responsible for the death of all of those who she considered to be family.

"\_Cortana\_."

John's concerned voice pulled her from the abyss.

The hideous visions of the Gravemind ebbed from Cortana's vision slowly. "I'm alright, John." She told herself she imagined the tremor in her voice.

Quickly, she collected herself and focused on what just happened. Soon, she realized her error.

The Gravemind hadn't been in the \_Light\_'s systems.

But she knew who was there.

She reluctantly ran a scan of the ship's systems; her fears were confirmed.

The \_Unto the Light\_ had been hijacked.



\*\*Back on our regularly scheduled chapter. As always, I'd love to know what you think. :D\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>John looked at the suddenly empty holotank and frowned. He opened a comm channel to the AI, ready to ask her if everything was alright.<p>

The ship, however, had other plans.

It lurched to the left unexpectedly. With little time to react, John reached and grabbed the closest console, fighting against the centrifugal force that was pushing against him.

"What the hell is going on here?" Keyes demanded when the ship straightened out.

"Ship's engines are non-responsive to controls," Ensign Paulson announced. "Our heading has been changed, sir."

"Cortana?" Keyes called.

There was no response. Frustrated, he jammed the comm button on the nearby station. "Where is she, Catherine?"

There was a long pause before the doctor responded. "\_She hasn't gone rampant if that's what you're asking, Jacob. She'll contact you when she can. Halsey out\_."

Keyes cursed as he started pacing around the bridge. John watched him pull out his ever present pipe and twist it in his hands.

"John." It was Doctor Halsey.

"Go ahead."

"\_Cortana is still in the \_Light\_'s systems. I need you to attempt to contact her while I trace down the data signature\_."

He hesitated. Why was she asking him?

The answer didn't really matter to him though; if Doctor Halsey needed him to do something he would do it. He reopened the comm channel to the AI. "Cortana."

She didn't answer.

He tried again. "Cortana, please respond."

John counted to five. She still didn't reply. He pushed aside his concern; Doctor Halsey had just told the captain that Cortana was fine. He opened the channel again. "Cortana."

Finally, he heard her shaky sigh. "I'm alright, John."

Something was wrong.

If John wasn't convinced of that before Cortana's abrupt departure

from the bridge and the fact he had to summon her more than once, then the unmistakable waver in her voice refused to let him think otherwise.

Cortana suddenly appeared in the holotank closest to John. He frowned as he took in her appearance. There was a decidedly green hue to her avatar that wasn't there before she left the bridge.

Her gaze flickered briefly to John before she looked at the captain. "We've got a problem, sir. Doctor Halsey wants a meeting in the conference room. Now."

Keyes looked at Cortana. "I want to know what's going on with my ship, Cortana."

"I understand, sir. But, the bridge is not the place to be having this conversation," she said pointedly, gesturing to the rest of the bridge crew who was watching their exchange with unabashed interest.

The captain looked at Cortana briefly before nodding and turning to walk away.

Cortana looked at John. She drew a deep breath, avoiding his eyes. "You should be there too."

Whatever happened in the Light's systems had been severe; he hadn't heard her this shaken up since he found her on High Charity.

No, he thought resolutely, that nightmare was over.

"What happened?"

She opened her mouth briefly before shaking her head. "You should get to the conference room, Chief," she said softly. The light from the holotank flickered and Cortana disappeared.

An unwelcome, uneasy feeling settled over him. Throughout everything they had been through together, Cortana had never withheld information from him.

Perhaps she wouldn't be able to complete her mission on Reach after all.

He pushed away his unfounded theory; until he was told differently, there was no reason to jump to conclusions. Ignoring the inquisitive looks from the bridge crew, John made his way across the bridge to the conference room.

As he entered the room, Doctor Halsey turned to him and nodded slightly. There was no hint of a smile on her face. Keyes was seated at the head of the table, sitting next to the doctor's tablet. John took his position at the side of the table, choosing to remain standing. Seconds later, Cortana appeared in the holotank next to Halsey.

There was no mistaking the green cast to her avatar now.

Cortana gave a quick nod to the doctor. She was still avoiding his gaze, John noticed. She kept her eyes locked on Halsey's tablet.

"At 1745, the Unto the Light's systems were hacked by a hostile AI. Thanks to Cortana and her quick thinking, we were able to contain it in the ship's nav systems," Halsey said from the head of the conference table.

John's adrenaline spiked. Their ship was hacked?

"Are you saying I don't have control of my ship?" The captain shot up from his chair and started pacing around the room.

"We're working on that, Jacob."

John didn't miss the surprised look that passed over Cortana's face.

"If we stay on this trajectory, our destination will be here," Doctor Halsey continued, pulling up a grainy image of an unfamiliar planet.

"ML-395?" Keyes said, reading the title. "Never heard of it."

"There is no reason to. A survey team went there nearly eighty years ago and deemed it not suitable for colonization. There were signs of a previous civilization, several major structures, but because of the magnetic fields and inconsistent weather patterns, the UNSC decided not to put a colony there," the doctor explained.

John watched as Keyes lit his pipe. Halsey frowned at him but said nothing.

"So we have no idea what's waiting for us there," grumbled Keyes.

"No." Cortana's single word echoed throughout the room.

Keyes took a long drag from his pipe before blowing off the stream of smoke, assessing her answer. "Do we have any idea what took over the system? Covenant?"

Cortana and Doctor Halsey exchanged a glance before Cortana let out a shaky breath.

The nervous feeling introduced itself to John again as he amended his earlier thoughts. He had never seen Cortana so disjointed and out of place.

"I believe, sir, it's a Forerunner AI: Mendicant Bias. I recognize his data signature from when I first encountered it on High Charity before Truth's ship left for earth," Cortana replied.

"How the hell did he manage to get off that Ark? Did he go through the Portal too?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, sir, but I would say that's a safe assumption."

He started pacing again. "Why this ship? It could have infiltrated any ship in the fleet."

She crossed her arms. "I believe his decision to target the Light was deliberate. I believe he chose this ship is because the Chief and I are on it. He may feel the need to come after us because we were responsible for the destruction of the Ark. Similar to how Guilty Spark reacted on the unfinished Halo ring," offered Cortana.

John frowned as the memories came rushing back to him: Johnson almost died because of Guilty Spark's rampancy.

"Or..." Cortana paused.

"Or?" the captain prompted.

"Or," she replied, sighing, "he could be trying to avenge the death of the Gravemind." At the mention of the Flood parasite, her avatar turned several shades more green. "Thanks to the information the Chief found in the terminals, we know the history between him and the Gravemind."

"But he said he regretted his actions," John said, entering into the conversation for the first time.

"We have reason to believe he may not have been sincere," Doctor Halsey said. She glanced worriedly at Cortana.

"Why?" Keyes said as he stopped pacing.

Halsey looked at Cortana who shook her head. The doctor closed her eyes briefly before replying. "When Cortana was about to disable him, he was able to overwrite her code and take over her systems briefly. During that time, it was as if she was with the Gravemind again." The doctor looked at John briefly. "It was similar, but more intense, than the times when the Gravemind infiltrated your armor."

John's gut tightened. He knew what Cortana had been through with the Gravemind; he had felt how she had been changed after her stay on High Charity. Her imprisonment on that Flood-invested vessel had caused her scars that she would never recover from.

"He used that diversion to infiltrate the system," Cortana continued, her voice strong and firm.

"He knew what he was doing. The vision lasted long enough for him to hijack the nav systems and he's been locked in there since." Doctor Halsey crossed her arms. "We've done everything we can, but as for right now, our fate is in his hands."

For a moment it seemed as if Keyes was going to argue, but he let out a frustrated sigh instead. "Understood." He leaned towards Halsey. "I want this AI out of my system, Catherine."

"We all do," she replied pointedly.

Keyes turned towards John. "Chief, I know you weren't expecting this, but I need you to be ready for...well, whatever is waiting for us."

"I will be, sir."

"Dismissed."

John stood up and walked out of the room. Based of the looks the two of them exchanged, he knew that the captain wanted a private conversation with the doctor. He ignored the worried glances of the bridge crew and made his way down to the armory.

It would be a while until they arrived at the planet, but now, with a hostile AI in the system, John needed to be ready for anything.

When he stepped inside the large room, filled with rows of automatic weapons, grenades and firearms, Cortana's avatar flickered from the holotank closest to him.

"She lied."

There was no sarcasm in her voice, just a flat emotionless tone.

Choosing a weapon suddenly became secondary. He turned and faced the AI. "Who lied?"

"Doctor Halsey. 'We' aren't looking for the solution. She is." She paused and started pacing. "I've been relieved of duty."

Cortana's words bounced off the walls of the armory. John noticed just how sluggishly the calculations were running over her body. He closed his eyes briefly as the weight of what she had said pressed upon him.

She sighed at his lack of response. "You have no idea the humiliation, the something, that I feel. Do you think they would ever relieve you, a Spartan, of duty? Even if they knew you were pushing yourself too hard?" She didn't wait for his answer. "Of course not, because you're human. And I'm just an AI. The AI that helped save the universe, but that isn't enough."

John shifted uncomfortably. The burning jealousy that Doctor Halsey had warned him about seemed to be making an appearance.

"Cortana," he started slowly, not wanting to upset her. "I'm sure Doctor Halsey has your best interests in mind."

She crossed her arms. "Trying to catch Mendicant Bias tapped my data processes. Doctor Halsey doesn't want to risk further degradation of my systems, so she locked me out of most of the Light's systems."

"Is she going to try the data transfer?"

She shook her head, her short digital hair swishing back and forth. "No. She doesn't want to risk it while Mendicant Bias is in the system. I would be too vulnerable to an attack."

Cortana walked to the edge of the holotank and frowned. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around herself. "I haven't felt this trapped since the Flood invasion."

John frowned. What was she talking about?

She got a far-off look, but there was no mistaking the fear in her

voice. "I was in that cursed forest when I heard that terrible sound."

A wave of uneasiness settled over John as he realized that whatever she was talking about hadn't really happened. "Cortana-"

But she was too far gone in her thoughts to hear him. "At first, I thought it was a mudslide. I mean, what else could it have been? I screamed for you as I ran through the streets, John. I screamed until my voice was so hoarse, I couldn't even whisper. But it wasn't enough. You didn't come. I couldn't escape them, John. There was no place to run, nothing I could do."

He swallowed thickly. False memory or not, there was no doubt that Cortana relived that moment as if it was real. "Cortana," he started again. "That never happened."

He watched as a myriad of emotions flickered over her face: disbelief, doubt, and embarrassment. She morphed into a pink color momentarily. "Of course it didn't," she replied softly, shaking her head. "My memories are starting to blur with the inherited memories Gravemind fed to me on High Charity. Sorry, Chief."

He shook off her apology. There was nothing she, or anyone else, could do to improve her situation until Mendicant Bias was out of the Light's systems. "Do you think there is a Forerunner installation on the planet?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'm sure Doctor Halsey will be better able to keep you apprised of the situation." John didn't miss the bitterness in her voice.

Though she was locked out of the majority of the Light's systems, there was no reason why she had to be alone. He reached over to the console to remove the matrix chip.

"No!" she shouted.

Instantly, he withdrew his hand.

"You can't take me with you." She shook her head. "There is a strong possibility that my deteriorating state will cause your armor to malfunction." She smiled sadly as the calculations nearly stopped scrolling over her body. "I have become a liability."

John hesitated a second, not knowing what to say. "Cortana..."

She waved off his attempt to talk to her. "Now would be a great time for some of that luck of yours to start showing up," she said dryly.

## 7. Backseat Driver

\*\*I guess with all this Halo Fest goodness that is coming out, it's a good time to remind you again that this is an AU and I am only using the established canon up to whatever came out during Halo: Reach. :D

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><p>The next several hours crawled by for Cortana. Being locked out of most of the Light's systems left her restless. And irritated. She had been letting John know in no uncertain terms what she thought of the doctor's decision to exclude her from dealing with Mendicant Bias.<p>

Cortana paced around in a tight circle from the holotank in the center of the bridge, watching the people around her. Captain Keyes had been keeping close tabs on Halsey. The doctor had barely looked up from the screens in her work station since she had sat down. The bridge crew sat at their stations, ineffective due to the system lockdown. John had his back to her, seeming to be content to wait for Mendicant Bias to make an appearance.

"We're dropping out of slipspace," Halsey announced.

Cortana wondered if it was odd for anyone else to hear the doctor's voice rather than her own to proclaim their arrival.

She watched as John's hands moved almost imperceptibly to his firearm. Despite the gravity of the situation, Cortana allowed herself one ironic smile at his action. Bullets weren't going to be able to take this AI down.

"He transferred his primary systems out of the system," Halsey said, breaking the uncomfortable quiet that had settled over the bridge.

"Good, now get us the hell out of here," Keyes said, reaching in his pocket for his pipe.

Halsey shook her head. "He still has several thousand remote subroutines in the Light's core. He still is in control of the ship."

"I could-"

"No, Cortana." The doctor's reply was firm, resolute. There would be no changing her mind.

Cortana fumed. Even if - and there was no certainty that it would - ridding the Light of their technological intruder would push her past the point where Halsey could recover her data, it was a price that she was willing to pay.

She opened her mouth to respond. Before she could, she heard an even voice cut through her private comm. "She's looking out for your best interests."

"And I'm looking out for everyone else's," she shot back.

He made no outside sign of a reaction, but Cortana knew the Spartan well enough to know that she had pushed too far, too hard, against him.

"I'm sorry," she sighed. "I don't do helpless well."

"Neither do Spartans." She could have sworn there tinge of amusement

in his voice. "Doctor Halsey isn't going to risk the crew. If she needs your help, she will tell you."

Cortana evaluated John's words. Yes, Halsey would come to her for help, but only as a last resort. The AI hoped that the doctor wouldn't wait until it was too late for her to counter whatever Mendicant Bias had planned for them.

She waited as the ship slowly flew towards the third planet in the system.

"Long range scans are picking up several large structures similar to Forerunner design," Halsey told the captain.

"Why didn't they detect that during the first survey?" Keyes asked, as he approached her station.

"Eighty years ago, the Forerunners were more a theory than fact, Jacob," Halsey reminded him. "Not to mention the quality of the scan was not up to current UNSC standards."

Keyes pressed his lips together. "How long until we're in orbit?"

"Ninety seconds."

They were running out of time. Who knew what Mendicant Bias had waiting for them on the unknown planet? Cortana knew that there was still enough time to delete the subroutines. She was a million times faster than any shipboard program.

She transferred herself to the holotank next to Halsey's station. Maybe she couldn't reason with the stubborn doctor, but surely the captain would be more practical. "Captain, I'm sure if I was just given the chance to disable the subroutines, I could. We could escape and get back to Earth."

His eyes flickered to Halsey before he answered, his voice low enough to where no one else on the bridge, with the exception of John and his enhanced hearing, could hear. "And what happens if this Mendicant Bias infiltrates the ship's systems again? The last time you chased him down, it nearly killed you."

Cortana held out a hand in front of her. The light green hue was now unmistakable. "But, what if he doesn't? That is a sacrifice I'd be willing to make. I do not want to go quietly in the night, sir."

Keyes frowned and shook his head. "You're not going to sacrifice yourself unnecessarily."

She crossed her arms. "How do you know it's 'unnecessary'? Every Forerunner installation we have encountered has dominated over our technology. We're running out of time--"

To her surprise, Cortana felt a surge of information flow into her matrix. Like a woman starved, she devoured the data.

Halsey turned to her, serious. "Those are the active readings from our sensors. There are no signs of any weapon systems. The most



significant power readings are still dwarfed by the Light. Until we know exactly what we are up against, we are not willing to risk your safety."

Cortana's eyes fluttered shut briefly. A wave of embarrassment at her overreaction washed over her. "Thank you, Catherine."

The doctor curtly nodded as she tapped several commands into the computer. "We've got an unknown object approaching Cargo Bay Alpha."

"What kind of object? Is it weapons based?"

Halsey shook her head. "No. Based on its shape and trajectory, I would say that it is similar in appearance to the Monitor on the Halo Installation."

Keyes nodded at John. "Get down there now, Chief."

The Spartan nodded. "Yes, sir," he replied as he exited the bridge.

"It's Bias," Cortana whispered.

Halsey nodded. "I would say that is a safe assumption." She pushed away from the desk and looked at Cortana. "Are you ready for this?"

Cortana raised her eyebrow. Just because she was going rampant didn't mean she had lost her fighting spirit. "You know that I am."

Then she transferred herself off the bridge.

## 8. Would Mr Guest Please Sign In?

**\*\*My reaction to Halo Fest? Yay for the Halo: CE pretties, but, dude if Jen Taylor doesn't come back at the voice of Cortana I am going to be one very unhappy fangirl. Anyway, mini rant over...back to the fic! And yes, I stole the chapter title from Speed. It was too good to pass up. :D**  
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\* \* \*

><p>John entered the cargo bay with a pistol in his hand and a healthy dose of adrenaline coursing through him. The main bay door was open, but John saw nothing out of the ordinary. He whipped around and aimed at the flicker of light coming from the corner of the room.<p>

"I don't think that would do much against a hologram," Cortana sarcastically replied as she crossed her arms.

John turned away from the AI and focused on the wide expanse of space looming out the opening of the bay. He saw the brown-purple planet below them, floating amiss billions of stars. He scanned the area, looking for Bias.

There.

A small sphere was slowly, but unmistakably moving towards the Light.

"Ten seconds until contact," Cortana announced.

John tucked himself in the shadows of the room. He wanted the advantage over the AI that had taken over their vessel. He patiently waited until a familiar-yet-not-exact replica of Guilty Spark floated into the cargo bay.

The large bay door started to close and the room began to repressurize. John watched as the AI slowed its trajectory and appeared to scan the room.

Not wanting his position to be compromised, John sprung out from his position and held a pistol to Bias' glowing blue eye. "Don't move."

The Forerunner AI seemed unnervingly calm despite the fact that his fate was in the hands of an irate Spartan. "I am not here to harm anyone, Reclaimer."

"Hijacking a ship isn't exactly a way to gain our trust," Cortana said, hand on her hip.

The floating orb made his way to the front of Cortana. "Oh dear, the damage to your construct is far worse than I anticipated." A beam of light shot from his mechanical eye, hitting Cortana.

John grabbed him, pulling him away from the AI. "Leave her alone," he growled.

"I am trying to help your Construct." He struggled against John's grip. "There isn't much time to save her!"

Cortana rolled her eyes. "Oh, now you're a hero, huh?"

John heard the door open from behind him and turned to face it, keeping his firm hold on Bias. Captain Keyes and Doctor Halsey walked into the room.

"Let him go, Chief."

John reluctantly released the AI who floated back to Cortana. This time, however, he did not attempt to activate the beam.

Keyes walked up to the AI. "Get your systems off my ship. Now."

Bias turned and faced the captain. "I am afraid I cannot do that." To John's surprise, he almost sounded apologetic.

"Why not?" Keyes demanded.

"I cannot leave until your construct is no longer in danger of succumbing to rampancy," Bias replied, turning back to Cortana.

"How noble." Cortana's voice came over their private comm channel. Aloud, she said, "Your help isn't needed."

"Actually, Construct," he replied, floating down to her eye level, "it is. The plan to attempt to circumvent your rampancy is flawed. Implementing my algorithm into your system will not work."

Cortana's eyes narrowed. "How did you find out about the plan in the first place?"

A heavy silence settled over the bay. John watched as Bias remained motionless until he finally spoke. "When you and the Reclaimers went to the control room on the newly created Installation 04, I attached my primary processing to your ship's systems."

"You hacked it," accused Cortana.

"I did what I needed to insure your safety," the AI countered.

Cortana rolled her eyes. "I didn't know you cared so much."

"I assure you, I only have your best interest in mind."

She crossed her arms. "Yeah, the last Forerunner AI we dealt with was a real winner. Tell me, Bias, was he thinking about our best interest when he killed Sergeant Johnson?"

John frowned. Johnson had survived the attack by Guilty Spark. He opened their private comm. "Cortana, Johnson didn't die on the Halo ring. He made it back with us on the Dawn."

"He did?" she said via their private comm channel. Her voice was full of confusion, but outwardly, her avatar seemed like a pillar of confidence.

"Yes."

"Great. Now I suppose everyone thinks I have lost my mind."

"Guilty Spark 343 was malfunctioning," argued Bias, unaware of their exchange. "Now, please, Construct, we need to act now. The longer we wait, the less data will be able to be salvaged."

"We'll take our chance with the plan that we have," Keyes said, entering into the conversation again. "Now get off my ship."

"Your plan will fail! Simply using my core algorithm will not be enough to save her from rampancy. Though we do have similar core programming, her system will reject it." The AI floated to the doctor. "However, my plan will work. I have already created a new algorithm that would allow for a data grafting process, combining the Forerunner technology with your own."

"What's the risk?" Halsey asked, looking at Cortana.

"That it is too late for any data to be salvageable. If that is the case, then nothing will stop her rampancy from continuing."

"And the probability percentage?"

"There is an eighty percent chance she will be able to survive the process, but there is no guarantee how much data will be salvageable."

She will-"

"\_She\_ is right here, you know." Cortana looked at them indignantly.

John noticed a chastised look pass over Halsey's face.

"I know that, Cortana," she said before she turned back to Bias. "We will not allow you to do anything to her until we know, exactly, what you are planning to do."

Bias considered her demand before replying, "Very well. I will upload the data to your ship's systems now."

A confused look passed over Halsey's face. "We have the system still locked down."

"Reclaimer," he replied, almost sounding amused, "I could have overwritten the protocols at any time. It is out of my concern for your construct that I did not transfer myself out of the navigation systems of your vessel."

Halsey stood there, stunned. John watched as various text and images appeared on the front of the doctor's tablet. "Cortana should have access to this too," she said, looking at the information in her fingertips. She tapped in several commands.

John watched as Cortana almost staggered forward.

"I'm alright."

John looked at her, cocking his head slightly.

"I could see the concern all over your face. Well, figuratively speaking."

"What do you think?"

She sighed. "I'd say it's a good plan, in theory. Much better than what Catherine is proposing. But, I don't know, John. The idea of trusting him is almost impossible."

John agreed. Their limited encounters with Forerunner AI, most notably Spark, left the UNSC with a distrust that would be foolish to ignore. "Maybe if Doctor Halsey were to monitor you..."

"Maybe..."

She looked at Bias suspiciously. "Why are you doing this?"

"Redemption, Construct. You managed to thwart the advances of a Gravemind. You deserve something for your strength," Mendicant Bias explained. "They," he said, turning back to the others in the room, "will never be able to truly understand what you went through, how difficult the temptation to give in was, but I do. And if I, someone who turned on his creators was given the chance to live such a long life, even in my disjointed state, then you deserve no less."

"This planet contains the Core?" Halsey said, reading the information.

"Yes. The Forerunner once used this facility to create their artificial intelligence units. I have already established a link with the central system which will be used to store your construct's data until it can be sifted and grafted to her new matrix chip," explained the AI.

Halsey turned to Keyes. "This could be the chance to save her, Jacob." The longing in her voice was unmistakable. "We may never get another opportunity."

"High Command will have my ass if they know I went along with this," he muttered, not taking his eyes off Cortana.

"Mendicant Bias' subroutines are still in the ship's systems, aren't they?"

John's question caused all three of them to look at him inquisitively. It was Cortana, unsurprisingly, who picked up on his unspoken idea first.

"They don't have to know it was done willingly," Cortana said.

Keyes frowned slightly as understanding dawned on him.

Bias floated in front of the captain. "I will keep my subroutines in your ship's system until the process is finished, but I give you my word that I will not try to infiltrate your system again."

"And what if I don't believe you?"

"If you are trusting me with the well-being of this construct, I would say that your ship is very insignificant in comparison," the AI replied.

Keyes slowly nodded. "All right."

Doctor Halsey walked to Cortana. "We'll do the monitoring in my temporary lab. Are you sure you want to do this?"

She nodded. "I'm not going to last much longer, Catherine," she whispered.

"I know."

Halsey gestured to Bias and Keyes and led them out of the room.

John walked across the room and stood in front of Cortana who was sitting down, hugging her knees. "There is a good chance that I won't survive, but I have no choice. I can feel the redundant data slowing my normal neural processes down," she replied honestly. "If I don't make itâ€¦"

He leaned forward, invading her personal space. "You'll make it." The tone in his voice left no room for argument.

"I wish I had your confidence," she admitted softly. She looked away slightly. "They are ready for me." Though she tried, John didn't miss

the look of panic that settled over her face. "I'll miss you."

"You'll be fine." There was no other option.

With that final encouragement, Cortana faded away.

## 9. What a Difference an Algorithm Makes

**\*\*Sorry about the delay...I've been on vacation all week. Back to the fic!**

**><strong>**

**\* \* \***

**><p>This needed to work.<p>**

Catherine was under no disillusion that unless Bias' plan worked, these would be Cortana's final hours. She had been carefully monitoring the cascading failures in Cortana's systems since she had wrangled Bias into the Light's nav systems. Her greenish hue and sluggish calculations were apparent to everyone who looked at her, but only the doctor knew how detrimental Cortana's condition was.

As she made her way through the Light, she read through Bias' plan to save Cortana. While it wasn't flawless -there could be no guarantees with Cortana's current condition- Catherine allowed herself to have faith in the new plan. The technologies at Bias' disposal were far greater than anything she had on Earth; the newly created algorithm and data grafting process would hopefully allow Cortana to achieve the illusive metastability.

She walked into the conference room with Bias and Jacob trailing her. It would be up to her to act as the liaison between Cortana and the Forerunner AI. Cortana's avatar flickered from the holotank in the center of the room.

Jacob looked at her before turning to Cortana. "Good luck," he said sincerely.

"Thank you, sir."

He nodded slightly and circled back to Catherine. "Take care of her," he charged her.

"You know I will," she replied testily.

"I know." He drew up his shoulder and walked out of the room. Jacob wasn't the kind of captain who wanted to sit around waiting for results to come in. No, he was a man of action, ready to fight along side his crew whenever a danger presented itself. But, now, the captain had no other option than to wait for Catherine's updates.

The doctor turned her attention to Cortana. "Where's John?"

"We've already said our goodbyes," Cortana replied.

"I am confident that there is enough time to salvage part of your

core processing, Construct. I believe your goodbyes were premature," Bias interjected.

Cortana glared at the AI, but said nothing.

Bias turned to Catherine. "You will find a new matrix chip in my casing that I have created for your construct. The algorithm is already programmed in it. Once we start the transfer, the chip's rudimentary programming will begin sifting out any corrupted data. When that is complete, the data grafting process will begin. Shall we proceed?"

Catherine looked at Cortana questioningly. The AI drew in a long breath and nodded. "Yank me."

The doctor nodded and ejected the matrix chip from the holotank. She inserted it back in her tablet which was connected to the Forerunner mainframe and held her breath.

"It will take at least one of your earth's hours to know if the procedure will be successful. Perhaps you would rather return when the results are closer to coming in," offered Bias.

Catherine wasn't going anywhere. "My place is here with Cortana."

"Very well." The orb moved to the front of Catherine. "All we can do now is stand by until the process is complete."

Catherine understood that truth all too well. She looked at her tablet which was streaming data code, both Forerunner and UNSC, but there was nothing discernible as to what was going on with Cortana.

The minutes crawled by. The wait was nearly unbearable.

Throughout her life, Catherine needed to show a seemingly endless supply of patience waiting for approvals from High Commands for various projects and proposals. The doctor drew from that long ago learned practice and forced herself to dismiss the anticipation of needing to know Cortana's status.

It didn't work.

Catherine gratefully looked up from the unhelpful information when the door to the conference room opened.

It was John.

"Captain Keyes requested that I get a status report, Doctor."

The doctor wasn't fooled; Jacob could have easily contacted her via the comm channel or come into the conference room himself. It seemed as though the captain wanted to give the Spartan a chance to check on the well-being of his friend.

"There's been no change in her status so far, John," Catherine admitted. "The first step in the process is nearly complete. Then we will be able to know if the transfer to the new matrix chip will be successful."

He nodded as he watched Bias float between the tablet and the other consoles in the room.

"Data sifting is at ninety-four percent. You may remain here, Reclaimer, until the operation is complete. We will know very shortly about your construct's fate," Bias said, not turning away from the tablet.

John turned to Catherine who nodded, gesturing towards a seat. The Spartan shook his head. "I'll be fine."

He remained motionless as he waited. Catherine hungered to open a conversation with him, but she knew her attempt would prove unfruitful. While Cortana may have been able to break through John's stoicism, Halsey had not.

Several minutes passed as they waited for the sifting process to be complete.

"Data sifting is complete. It is time to attempt to transfer your construct," announced Bias. John turned slightly to face the doctor.

"How much data was able to be saved?" Catherine asked anxiously.

"Forty-six percent."

Catherine closed her eyes at the news. So much data had been lost.

"Do not be too concerned, Reclaimer. Much of the corrupted data came from two main sources: the information she gathered on Installation 04 which will be recoverable and..."

"And?" John prompted.

"The data the Gravemind fed her on the vessel you call High Charity," Bias reluctantly answered.

"She doesn't need to recall that," Halsey replied.

"Agreed. Please proceed with chip transfer."

Catherine nodded and ejected Cortana's old chip from her tablet. Bias floated to Catherine's eye level and rotated. She saw the open compartment and the chip. Gingerly, she took the casing and slid it in the chip reader.

Ones and zeroes began scrolling at impossible rates. Finally, Bias turned to them, his blue eye shining brightly. "Success!" he crowed. "Your construct's core processing has accepted the algorithm! Data grafting will now proceed."

It was a process that could take several hours, Catherine knew. Cortana would have to relearn how to store, process and categorize the data with the new matrix chip.

Bias rotated slightly, giving the appearance of tilting his head. "It would appear that your construct is eager to activate her avatar."



A spark of hope fluttered through Halsey. That kind of tenacity sounded like the Cortana they knew.

"I should warn you, however, she has only the most rudimentary programming. All of the viable data she acquired throughout her first activation is being sorted. It is likely she will not recognize who you are," warned the AI.

She understood Cortana's temporary limitations, but she was still eager to see her. "How much of a delay will activating her avatar create?"

"It will be negligible," answered Bias. "The holographic interface is a minor program."

Catherine nodded. "Then let her proceed."

"As you wish, Reclaimer."

Less than two seconds later, Cortana appeared from the holotank.

Instantly, Catherine was mentally transported to that day when Cortana had first activated her avatar on Reach. Calculations sped over her body at an unfeasibly fast speed, her bright purple color testified to the fact she had, in fact, been reborn.

She watched as Cortana, by instinct or some subconscious memory that had already been processed, turned to John and smiled. "Hi. What's your name?"

He strode across the room and knelt to be level with Cortana. "I'm John," he replied.

Catherine waited for any signs of recognition to pass over Cortana's face, but there was none. She refused to be disappointed; Cortana would remember soon enough.

"It's very nice to meet you." She stuck her hand out before belatedly realizing that she could not, in fact, shake his hand. She moved her hand to her hip. "Do you like to play games?"

A wave of unsteadiness washed over Halsey. She knew those exactly words. She had spoken them to the man standing in front of Cortana, nearly thirty years earlier.

John looked at Halsey briefly. It seemed as though he recognized the question as well. He turned back to Cortana. "Yes."

A wide smile passed over Cortana's face. "So do I."

## 10. What's a Few Trillion Missing Terabytes?

**\*\*Another Saturday, another update!  
><strong>**

\* \* \*

><p>There was no stopping her now.<p>

After three hours of data grafting and getting accustomed to the new way of processing data, Cortana was finally finished with the transfer process. She did her best to ignore the fact there was not much data still missing -fifty-four percent- and focus on the incredible fact that she had reached metastability.

She looked at Halsey. "I'm ready to attempt the interface with the MJOLNIR armor."

The doctor, who hadn't left her side since her avatar had been activated, nodded. "Go ahead and transfer yourself to Med Bay Three. I have John heading down there in case there are any issues with integration."

"Understood."

As she transferred herself through the Light's systems, she allowed herself to analyze the Spartan that had been her near-constant companion throughout her departure from Reach.

John.

He had stayed with her much of the time since her reactivation. He, like Halsey, had patiently answered any questions she had so she could piece together as much of the missing information as possible.

Cortana wished she could accurately describe the relationship between the two of them. But even with access to his mission logs, seeing the Halo campaign through his eyes and the somewhat intact data she had managed to preserve, the majority of her time on the first Halo ring and High Charity had been lost. She couldn't pinpoint what they were to each other.

Best friends? Fellow soldiers both equally determined to complete their goal no matter the cost?

She pushed away the pointless inquiry. It didn't really matter what they were; Cortana knew that, however someone would categorize their relationship, they managed to work together to bring down the Covenant and the Flood to save humanity.

She appeared in the holotank closest to the entrance of the med bay. It was no surprise to her that John entered the room first.

The AI seized on the fact they would have a couple of minutes alone before the others arrived. "Did you really hit your helmet to get me to shut up?" Cortana asked with a mixture of disbelief and amusement as automatic doors closed behind him.

She wished she could have seen the look on his face; based on the two second pause, he was not expecting her to ask that particular question. "What?"

Cortana was not fooled by his feigned ignorance. She suspected he knew exactly what she was talking about. "On the first Halo ring. When I transported you, I reversed the coordinates and you ended up materializing upside-downâ€¦"

"I was stressed out at the time." She could hear the grimace in his voice.

"Huh," Cortana said, not impressed with his answer. "Is there is anything else I should know about? Maybe like you taking out my matrix chip and threatening to throw it in deep space?"

He ignored her questions. "How is the data transfer going?"

Cortana flashed a brief smile. "It's complete."

"And?" he asked, stepping towards her.

She crossed her arms. "I know I should be grateful for being able to process anything right now, but I find myself frustrated. I am still missing enormous chunks of data."

"Thanks to the information in your armor and Doctor Halsey's files, I have been able to incorporate that data into my matrix, but my memories are still spotty," Cortana quietly confessed. She hated admitting her weakness aloud. "I can remember choosing you as the Spartan I wanted to work with, but I can't remember the first time I met you."

"You could just ask," he answered simply.

She had been doing that since her avatar activated. Still, there was so many answers that she yearned to know. She shook her head. "There's too much missing."

"We have time."

She considered his offer. Cortana knew that soon Bias would give her access to the Forerunner mainframe and she would be able to reacquire all the data -and more- that she got from the first Halo ring and once they returned to Earth, she would have full access to the UNSC database, but there were some things that only John would be able to show her.

"Well," she smirked, "seeing your face would be nice."

Cortana wondered if her request bothered him. He stared at her long enough to make her feel like she asked him to do something obscenely inappropriate.

"John?"

Finally, he reached around and released the locks on his helmet. Wordlessly, he took off his helmet and set it next to her holotank. He knelt in front of her, allowing her to silently study his face.

He was handsome. For a human.

His dark brown eyes studied her closely as she surveyed him. John remained silent as she continued her visual inspection of the man in front of her. The long, jagged scar running down his chin told of his dangerous past. Without thinking about his reaction, she raised her hand up to his face. He held his breath as she attempted to trace a

long scar running across his jaw.

"How did you get this?" she asked softly, letting her hand fall.

John breathed again.

"I got a little too close to an illegal trader on Arvada nine," he said, standing up. "She wasn't too happy at the fact a bunch of kids had busted up her weapon ring. She managed to fire off an RPG at my group. I was too close to the shrapnel. My jaw shattered at the impact. Sam and Grace got me back to the transport quickly. When I got back aboard, they weren't too sure if I would make it."

"But, like always, you defied the odds," she said proudly.

"You always told me I was lucky." He put the helmet back on. He seemed back comfortable with his face hidden behind his visor, Cortana noted.

"Well, I did choose you," she replied playfully.

The moment was interrupted when the doors opened. Halsey walked in with her ever-present tablet in her hands. "Did you have the final analysis ready?"

Cortana nodded. "I'm sending the projections to you now." Despite the confidence in her voice, the AI was concerned that the initial data transfer when she entered the armor would be too much for John's nervous system to handle.

While the algorithm Bias created for her did allow her to avoid the threat of rampancy, the sheer speed of her processes moved so quickly, the armor would never be able to directly interface with her chip as it had before. She and Halsey had created a buffering system that would hopefully prevent any issues between the two of them.

Halsey frowned slightly. Cortana knew she wouldn't like the projections, but there was nothing in their current condition they could do to lessen the risk to the Spartan.

"If there was any other solutions, I would have found them," Cortana said.

"I know." The doctor turned towards John. "The procedure is going to be rather...intense, John. Cortana has done everything she can do to insure your safety, but there is the risk that her new chip will be too much for your armor to handle."

John looked at Cortana and nodded. "I understand, ma'am."

"Very well." Halsey reluctantly nodded.

Cortana looked at the Chief and nodded. "Yank me."

He reached over to the holotank. Cortana felt herself rush out of the Light's system and move into the confining space of the matrix chip. Seconds later, she recognized the data signature of John's armor. She transferred her systems into the suit.

Immediately, the system warned her about John's vitals. His blood pressure was dropping; his pulse was racing. She scrambled to reinforce the buffer, but it was too late: John had lost consciousness.

## 11. Was There Something You Wanted to Say?

**\*\*Another week, another update! A couple of reminders here, the canon used in this AU is listed at the beginning of the fic. I know there are new books concerning the Forerunners and their history. That canon isn't referenced here. And, there is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it nod to my other fic, "Assessment".**  
><strong>

\* \* \*

><p>"Chief! Chief? Can you hear me?"<p>

A sense of deja vu washed over John as he listened to Cortana's panicked voice. Slowly, he opened his eyes. The bright glare from the overhead lights in the med bay were shining in his eyes. He struggled to remember what happened. One moment, he was putting Cortana's matrix chip in his neural lace and the next, he was laying on the floor.

"Chief?"

"I'm here," he answered.

"At last!" The smile was evident in her voice. "Can you move?"

He nodded as he pulled himself into a standing position. The world around him was spinning violently. He closed his eyes and waited until the wave of vertigo passed. Halsey was looking at him, concerned.

"I guess I'm too much for you to handle," Cortana cheekily replied. Her voice softened slightly. "You alright?"

"I'm...fine."

Though the room had stopped spinning, John couldn't ignore the feeling that there was something wrong. Normally, Cortana's presence in his armor was noticeable, but not distracting. Now, it felt as if she was constantly looking over his shoulder. If he concentrated, he could almost feel her processes running through his neural lace.

"That sounded convincing," she said dryly through his helmet speakers.

"It feels different," he hedged.

Halsey looked up from her tablet with an inquisitive look. "How so?"

He shook his head. "Before, I knew when she was in my armor, now it feels as if she is in my mind." He paused. "It's slightly

disorienting."

"It could be the buffer," Cortana suggested. "More of my protocols are interacting with his neural lace. I tried to strip out as many commands as I could, but with the algorithm, it was the best I could do."

Halsey considered Cortana's words for a moment. She set down her tablet and crossed her arms, taking a position that John had seen Cortana taken numerous times over the past year. "It's your call, John. Now that the initial transfer has taken place and some of Cortana's subroutines will always be in place in your armor, the threat of losing consciousness has passed. However, this feeling you describe is more than likely not going to change. It is up to you if you want to continue acting as Cortana's custodian or not."

Regardless of the awkwardness of the connection, John couldn't imagine working in his suit without Cortana. "I'll be fine, ma'am."

A whisper of a smile passed over her lips. "I thought you would say that." She looked back at the computer. "Go ahead and transfer Cortana back to the Light, John."

He held his hand over the holotank. Cortana appeared less than a second later. She smiled apologetically at him. "Sorry about that, Chief."

He waved off her apology.

She took a seat and crossed her legs. "It seems as though Bias is finally letting me have a crack at the Forerunner database," she said, pleased. "I'll let you know if I find something interesting," she said, flashing a wink at the two of them.

She might have been missing a large amount of data, John thought, but she had lost none of her personality.

"Unorthodox," Halsey muttered.

John looked at the doctor and nodded. He had used that very same word on Reach when Halsey had asked for his preliminary assessment of the AI. "Yes, ma'am."

"Please take a seat and remove your helmet, John," she instructed, getting back to business. "I need to make sure there was no damage done to the interface or your neural lace when Cortana transferred her systems to your armor."

Nearly a quarter of an hour passed. Halsey was running a final scan on his neural lace when Cortana suddenly shot up from her position. "What's the Hive?" she demanded.

John and Halsey looked at each other, confused. Was this some random piece of information Cortana's system had created during her rampancy?

"It's a Forerunner installation?" Cortana prompted.

Halsey shook her head first. "We've never been there."

Cortana pressed her lips together, annoyed. "We need to talk to Bias. Now."

John watched as she stood there motionless for a second, no doubt summoning the AI. She started pacing in a tight circle. Neither he nor Halsey asked her for clarification; it seemed that until the Forerunner AI appeared, Cortana was willing to keep the information about the mysterious Hive to herself.

Several minutes later, the doors slid apart. Keyes walked in the room, Bias was floating several feet behind him. Before the captain could ask what was going on, Cortana pinned the AI with a stare. "When were you going to tell us?"

To his credit, he didn't feign ignorance. "The Sentinels should be able to deal with this unexpected encounter," replied Bias, unperturbed.

"So that would be never," Cortana shot back.

"What's going on?" Keyes asked, looking back and forth between the two AIs.

Bias ignored the captain and floated directly in front of Cortana. "You have managed to pervade the Forerunner infrastructure faster than I anticipated. I didn't expect for you to be linked into the security protocols so soon."

"I'm not to be underestimated," she replied coolly.

"However," he continued, "I was going to tell you once the threat had been eliminated."

Keyes moved to stand between the two of them. "Tell us what?"

Cortana looked away momentarily; John knew she was accessing the information from the Forerunner network. "There is a Forerunner installation called the Hive. It's there that the Forerunners developed their technology. Artificial intelligence, the Halo array, the Portal...everything. Somehow, there is a group of Covenant who have discovered its location and are on their way there. The proximity sensors on the installation's surface detected them an hour ago."

She turned to the captain, her face grim. "There is a Key there, sir," Cortana explained. "If they find it, then they will be able to control the Halos."

John's gut tightened at the implication of her words. All they had done going through the Portal was a waste?

The captain shook his head in disbelief. "But you activated the Index and the Ark was destroyed. I thought the other Installations worked in tangent with it."

"The Ark has an ability to regenerate itself just like the Rings do, sir. It will take more time, but Installation 00 will be rebuilt,"

replied Cortana.

Keyes rubbed his chin, considering Cortana's words. "OK, so we need to get this key before the Covenant do."

Bias huffed indignantly. "I have already told you, the Sentinels are-"

"You wouldn't know," Cortana accused, crossing her arms. "You were locked out of the system a hundred thousand years ago when you defected to the Flood."

Several tense seconds passed, before Bias conceded. "They should be able to defend the installation without your assistance," he corrected.

"I'm not willing to try the 'let's wait and see approach'," replied Cortana. She turned to face Keyes. "We need to get there, sir. It is the only fail safe against the Halos from ever being activated again. The Forerunners created the Key to lock the Halo's weapons down after the Flood threat past. After all, the original purpose of the Halo rings was to support and encourage life."

Keyes turned towards Bias. "How do we get this key?"

"You cannot. Your Construct-"

"Cortana," she corrected testily.

"-Can. The information she is uploading contains specific instructions of how to recover it, but I would encourage you to wait and see if the defense systems will take care of the threat itself," Bias replied.

Keyes shook his head. "So the Covenant can have an advantage over us again? I don't think so."

## 12. Lovely Parting Gift

**\*\*Again, a reminder that the canon used in this AU is listed at the beginning of the fic. Things go pretty AU from here. (As if they weren't already. LOL)**  
><strong>

\* \* \*

><p>They were preparing to leave.<p>

After being convinced by the UNSC's most influential quartet: Captain Keyes, Doctor Halsey, Spartan-117 and UNSC AI CTN 0452-9, Lord Hood gave authorization for the Light to pursue the Brute threat in the Forerunner installation. There had been times during the terse exchange when Cortana thought that there was absolutely no way for them to convince the admiral to allow them to go to the Hive. But, by the time the conversation was nearing its end, Lord Hood had offered to contact the Separatists for help knowing that the UNSC didn't have enough ships in the fleet to spare.

Now, there was just one thing left to do.



Cortana needed to say goodbye and give thanks to the AI that had given her a chance to do the impossible and live a long life.

She found him in the cargo bay that he first entered. "So I guess this is goodbye."

He twirled towards her and appraised her momentarily. "I have learned, Construct, that there are no real goodbyes. Fates such as ours are bound to meet again."

"You seem awfully confident about that."

"It comes with the wisdom of being in existence as long as I have," he said evenly.

"Doctor Halsey says you intend to remain here and aren't going to the Hive."

"She is correct. You are the custodian of the voucher now. My presence there will be of no assistance to you or the Reclaimers," he answered.

Cortana made the small rectangular cube appear in the palm of her hand. Like the index, it had solid form and yet she was able to manipulate it with her holographic avatar. She withdrew the Forerunner artifact and looked back to Bias. "Are you sure you don't want to go back to Earth? I know a few tech heads that would love to get their hands on you," Cortana replied.

"I have had the time to review the methods of your ONI and I am confident that remaining here is my best course of action," he retorted. He paused for a second. "There is something else I wish to impart to you before you leave. It will assist in your journey to the Hive."

Cortana's eyebrows rose. "New engines?"

Even with her advanced calculations, Cortana estimated it would still take the Light a better part of six weeks to reach the Hive. Bias had been adamant that the Sentinels would be able to hold off the Covenant insurrection until they reached the installation.

"Not exactly."

Cortana detected a vessel coming from the planet's surface. "Do you want to explain what's going on?"

"There is no possibility of being able to refit your ship with new engines. However, this ship -your ship- will have the ability to create a slipspace bubble which will allow this vessel to travel speeds unknown to your people," Bias explained.

"Unknown speeds, huh? Wait...did you say my ship?" She had to admit, Captain Cortana did have a nice ring to it.

He tilted slightly as he appeared to nod. "The ship's systems have been programmed to work with your matrix exclusively. An AI of your caliber should not be limited to existing in a holographic avatar sitting on the Reclaimers' planet, however temporary that may be,"

Bias explained.

Cortana frowned at the AI's reminder. While the matrix chip she had transferred to would continue working as her previous chip did, soon she would need a larger system to contain her programming. Doctor Halsey had already mentioned moving forward with the idea of giving her a synthetic human body.

She forced herself to not worry about that; right now, they had an objective that was imperative to humanity's survival to complete. "Does it have a name?"

"Harbinger."

"Fitting," she said drolly.

She accessed the schematics on the Harbinger.

It was enormous. Even at half the size of a Forerunner Keyship, it made the Light look paltry. The four mile wide vessel could easily hold a company of a thousand soldiers. As Cortana access the data on its shielding and weapons, she raised an eyebrow. The power in the ship dominated the entire UNSC firepower that had been on Reach.

"Couldn't find anything smaller?" she quipped.

He ignored her flippant remark. "You will be able to operate both ships in tangent with each other. The slipspace bubble that the Harbinger will create will be large enough to bring your current vessel with it," Bias said. He floated in front of Cortana. "You hold the fate of the universe in your hand, Construct."

"It's not the first time."

"No," he admitted, "it's not. That is why I trust you to put an end to my creators' mistake of fabricating those rings of death. The monitors there will be defensive of their Installations, but you must do whatever it takes to seal off the rings."

"I will," vowed Cortana. She looked out the bay window and saw the ship come into view.

The arrow-shaped vessel pulled alongside of the Light, casting a shadow on the smaller vessel.

A niggle of recognition floated it her mind. She had seen a ship that looked like that before, but she couldn't pinpoint where. She would have to ask John about it later.

The new vessel didn't go unnoticed. "Cortana, what is going on?" She could hear Keyes' annoyance over the comm channel.

"Apparently, Bias wanted to give us one last parting gift before we left, sir."

There was a heavy pause. She could almost imagine him thinking how he was going to explain bringing the ship back to Earth. "That's quite a gift."

"Yes, sir."

Cortana turned back to Bias as the comm channel closed. The AI considered her for a moment. "There is nothing else to say other than 'good luck'. I am confident the Reclaimers will do everything in their power to assist you. They seem quite protective of you."

"And I am of them."

"I certainly know that. You act as though you are a Reclaimer," he noted contritely. "It is perhaps that difference that made you able to fight against the Gravemind the way that you did."

Cortana wished she could have readily agreed with him. But her time with the Gravemind was the most convoluted part of her memory. When she had asked John questions about her time on High Charity -Why had he left her there? Did he know what the Gravemind actually did to her? -he had emphatically refused to answer anything pertaining to that time during the Halo campaign.

The AI picked up on her silence. "Forgive my mistake, Construct. I know that you long to know what happened, but trust your Reclaimer: it is best for you not to recall such tragic times."

Cortana's annoyance at everyone's insistence to protect her from those memories was overshadowed by her amusement at Bias' title for the Chief. There were many Reclaimers, but only John was her Reclaimer. Besides, she knew how tenacious she was; she would do everything she could to find out what happened to her when she stayed behind on High Charity.

He opened the bay doors and waited for the room to depressurize. "Good luck...Cortana."

She looked at him in surprise. He had never addressed her by her name since he arrived on the Light. "Thank you," she said as he floated away, back to the Core.

It was time to move forward.

### 13. This Structure's Not a Natural Formation

Cortana enjoyed being captain of her own ship. Over the seven day trek across the universe, the AI along with Halsey and several member's of the Light's crew had taken their time learning about the vessel that had been bestowed on her.

Bias had done his research; the vessel was a perfect blend of UNSC and Forerunner technology and Cortana was its perfect custodian. Seven days ago, she had activated the slipspace bubble and "pulled" the Light through, allowing them to travel at previously unheard of speeds.

It would take the techs at ONI and lifetime or two to process all the technology on the ship. Cortana, however, was much more fortunate. The data she had been given from the Forerunner database allowed her to have an intimate understanding of the Harbinger.

As they finally exited out of slipspace and entered the Devron

system, Cortana pulled up the video feed from the \_Harbinger\_ and channeled it through the \_Light\_'s systems. The Hive, a 1,500 mile cube, hovered above the third planet in the system. Three Covenant Cruisers loomed over the enormous installation. So far they hadn't detected the ships' entrance in the system; their weapons systems were powered down. Cortana piloted the vessels behind the fourth moon with a high magnetic field to hide their presence as she scanned the area.

"Not as impressive as the Halo ring," Keyes noted.

Cortana shrugged. "Maybe the Forerunners intentionally made this installation smaller as to not to attract the attention of the Flood."

"How much of a head start did they get?" Keyes asked, walking to her position.

She shrugged. "Best guess? At least a day, probably two. But," she said, accessing the sensor information, "what's interesting is that life signs are still congregated around one part of the installation."

"The control center?"

She shook her head. "No, though there is significant power running to that particular part of the base, it's not the main control center. And I'm not going to know until I can activate this," she replied, holding out the holographic voucher, "my information is rather limited."

"Then the Key is still safe?"

"I don't see how they could have gotten access to it without the Voucher, sir. No, whatever they are looking for, it's not that," Cortana answered.

Keyes looked at the main viewer, staring at the enemy ships. "Then why are they here?" he muttered. Louder, he asked, "Are there any other vessels in the system?"

"Negative, sir. If the Separatists are showing up, then they are running late," she answered. Though she knew their presence was doubtful, she knew the captain, and John, were hoping for their tentative allies to assist them in this matter.

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Understood, Cortana." He tapped his pipe on his thigh. "We need those Cruisers out of our way."

"That won't be a problem, sir. I've already uploaded attack pattern Delta into the \_Harbinger\_'s systems. Once we're into position, it will be ready to fire."

Keyes nodded. "Do it."

Cortana commanded the ships to move towards the Hive. As the \_Harbinger\_ moved into position, it began firing on the Cruisers. With Cortana's flawless calculations, the plasma canons hit their mark. The \_Light\_ was sheltered by the large vessel, hovering behind the enormous ship.

She watched as explosions rocked the Covenant ships. She started evasive maneuvers, but, for the most part, they were unnecessary. It seemed as though whoever was at the controls lacked the precision that the Covenant were known for. Maybe the Brutes had left a handful of Grunts on the ships, not thinking there was any chance for the UNSC to ruin their plans.

Well, they were certainly in for a surprise.

The bridge crew watched in awe as the Forerunner ship destroyed the three cruisers seemingly with little effort. Keyes nodded grimly at the image of the debris from the destroyed ships.

"Chief," he said to the Spartan who was standing next to Cortana's holotank, "get Johnson and the rest of the team together. I want you to take a Pelican down to the Hive so Cortana can get this Key."

The Chief nodded. "Yes, sir."

His hand hovered over the matrix chip. Though she had run several hundred simulations, she hadn't convinced herself that the transfer from the \_Light\_'s systems to John's armor would be flawless. But, the time had passed for second-guessing. Cortana nodded to him. "Yank me."

As his hand hovered over the holotank, Cortana felt herself transfer to the Chief's armor. She quickly ran a scan on the Chief to access his vitals, but there were no issues. She had safely made the shift to his suit.

The two of them walked through the halls of the \_Light\_. Cortana knew he was eager to get down to the surface and fight; he had been stuck in the ship for too long. Finally, they entered the cargo bay where Johnson and a dozen Marines were waiting for them. "So, it's up to us to save humanity again, huh, Chief?" He slapped the Spartan's shoulder. "It's a good thing there are so many Marines goin' with us."

A few laughs slipped out. Only Cortana knew that behind the visor, John allowed himself a brief smile at Johnson's cheeky comment. The handful of officers grabbed their weapons and boarded the waiting Pelican.

John transferred Cortana to the Pelican's main systems. Seconds later, she piloted the small vessel out of the bay.

Johnson approached the small holotank on the pilot controls. "When do I get a tour of your new ride, ma'am?" he asked, nodding towards the \_Harbinger\_.

"About after we take care of the Covenant?" she offered.

He grinned widely. "I'm gonna hold you to that. I can't have the techies havin' all the fun."

She allowed herself a brief smile at Johnson's gregariousness before focusing on getting the Pelican onto the Hive. Cortana plotted a direct course of the main control center. The congregation of the Covenant ground forces were located several kilometers away from the

hub. Maybe, with John's luck, they would have enough time for her to get into the system and retrieve the Key before the Covenant could reach their location.

It was a long shot, she grudgingly admitted. The Grunts had probably told those on the surface about their arrival before the cruisers were destroyed. That didn't stop her from implementing a jamming signal in the Covenant's battlenet. If they were going to get a message to each other on the surface, they were going to have to work for it.

"ETA in three minutes," she announced to the crew.

"I'll upload the coordinates to the main terminal once we get on the surface," she said to the Chief via their private comm. "I don't know how long it will take for the system to verify the voucher. Bias wasn't too forthcoming about the details."

"You'll be fine."

She put a hand on her hip. "Your optimism still manages to surprise me, Chief."

As she piloted the Pelican, the sensors from both ships -the Light and the Harbinger- alerted her to the fact that there were multiple slipspace ruptures forming in the system.

The Separatists had arrived.

"It would seem as if your friend doesn't want you to have all the fun. Four Separatists Cruisers, including the Shadow of Intent, have entered the system," Cortana said. She monitored the communication channel between the Arbiter's ship and the Light. "In fact," she said, raising an eyebrow, "they are eager to come help us out."

John nodded slightly, seemingly indifferent to the Separatists' appearance, but Cortana knew that he was happy to see some backup.

"We're entering the atmosphere. Wanna take a seat?"

He shook his head slightly. "I'm fine."

She crossed her arms, not convinced. "You do remember what happened on the first Halo right, right? You know, you almost died?"

"I'll be fine," he insisted.

Cortana sighed. The only person whose stubbornness could rival her own had to be the one person she was partnered to work with, she thought with a wave of frustration. "Have it your way," she replied as she piloted the ship to the surface.

As John predicted, there were no incidents with their landing. When the Pelican set down, John reached over and removed her chip from the holotank. He and the others disembarked from the ship. "The Arbiter and his team will be here as soon as they can," she said via John's speakers.

"And to think," Johnson replied, his cigar hanging from his lip, "I didn't even get a chance to miss him yet."

"I'm sure he feels the same way about us, Johnson," John retorted dryly.

She huffed a silent laugh. She had nearly forgotten that John could, in fact, be quite cynical in his thinking. There was no time for her to comment, however. In the distance, she detected Covenant movement. "We've got four Banshees inbound to our location, Chief."

"Understood." He led the team into the giant structure. As the large doors slid apart, Cortana uploaded the main hub's location to his HUD. "I hope everyone is in the mood to walk. The control panel in seven floors under ground. And the grav lifts are not operational."

Johnson sighed. "The damn Forerunners can't make anything easy, can they?"

"They did seem to overdo things, didn't they?" Cortana mused.

John turned towards Johnson and the rest of the Marines. "Stay here and wait for the Arbiter," he ordered.

Johnson nodded. "Will do, Chief. We'll make sure we don't have any unwanted visitors crashing our party."

14. Dude, srsly?

\*\*As always, thanks for following along for the ride. :D Disclaimers and notes in Part 1.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>John knew something wasn't right.<p>

It shouldn't have been so easy to reach the control center, especially with the Covenant having such a head start on them. Even with the disorganization they would be dealing with after the death of the Prophets, the Covenant weren't sloppy. Whatever they were after in the other structure was more important than the control center and John hated not knowing what was going on.

He pushed away his discomfort. There would be time to see what they were doing once Cortana retrieved the Key from the systems.

"Are there any signs of the Flood?" he asked as he descended another ramp.

"No," she said assuredly. "Besides, I don't think they would have been able to survive after the Gravemind died."

John wasn't so sure; he knew the Flood were not to be underestimated.

"Speaking of the Gravemind, want to let me in on what happened on High Charity during those three weeks I was left to fend for myself?"

Cortana's voice with laced with exasperation.

John knew she longed to know what happened to her during her self-imposed exile, but he had no desire to go into the details of what happened there. She had survived. He had kept his promise. It was as simple as that. "I wasn't there."

He could almost feel her wave of annoyance wash over him as if it was his own. It was the second time he had felt that intensity of their connection since Cortana had entered his armor. It was strange despite the familiarity he shared with the AI.

Worse, it was distracting. He didn't know how he would react if Cortana's colorful feelings overrode his more calm emotions in the heat of a firefight.

"What's wrong?" All traces of frustration in her voice were gone.

They had other, more pressing, issues to deal with. He would talk to her and Doctor Halsey about it after they completed their mission. "It's nothing."

"Chief, if this about the Gravemind-"

"It's not."

"Then what is it?" He could almost see her placing her hand on her hip.

"Later." The tone of his voice ended that part of the conversation.

She blew out a sigh, but thankfully she let the issue go. He walked down the last ramp and saw the enormous terminal in the center of the room. After scanning the room, making sure there were no hidden enemies, John crossed the room and reached behind his helmet to eject Cortana's chip.

John slipped the chip into the slot and waited for Cortana to appear. Several seconds passed before she activated her avatar. Her arms were crossed, her face determined. "All right, the system seems to have accepted the voucher, but it's going to take some time to work through the encryption as expected. It's nothing I can't handle, but..." She trailed off, frowning.

"Yes?"

She looked at him uneasily. "The Covenant are up to something, John. I'm detecting massive energy surges from their position. I can't tell what they are doing there, yet, but you need to get over there and find out what is happening."

John frowned. "You don't know what they are doing?"

She shook her head. "Though the voucher has been accepted by the system, there hasn't been enough time for it to authenticate yet. I should have more information once it has been accepted, but I'll be honest, Chief, I'm not sure how long it's going to take."



The Spartan didn't like the idea of leaving Cortana alone in the Forerunner system; it reminded him of what happened during their trip to the first Halo ring. But, he knew that Cortana wouldn't send him to see what the Covenant were doing unless she thought it was necessary. He nodded. "All right. If there are any problems-

"I'll let you know," she finished. "I did manage to get the grav lifts working again, so you won't have to climb seven flights."

He nodded his thanks and turned from the AI. She deactivated her avatar, causing the purplish hue of the room to fade away. As he stepped onto the gravlift, he opened a comm channel to Johnson. "Plans have changed. Get everyone ready to mobilize."

There was a long pause. "Everything alright?"

"We're going to figure out what the Covenant are doing."

"Good." He laughed. "We were starting to get bored up here."

John reached around and grabbed his assault rifle. By the time the lift reached the ground level, John was ready to fight. The group of Marines led by Johnson were giving covering fire as the Arbiter and several Separatist soldiers came into the building.

One of the grenadiers aimed and fired an RPG at a crippled Banshee. "Now that's how it's done!" Johnson crowed, slapping the Marine on the shoulder.

The sergeant noticed John and inclined his head in his direction. "You missed all of the fun, Chief."

John said nothing as he curtly nodded in the Arbiter's direction. As he led the group out of the structure, Cortana uploaded the Covenant location. They were just over four kilometers away. He glanced towards the southwest and saw a large building in the distance. "They're over there."

"Then it's time for us to get some wheels," Johnson proclaimed as they jogged to the Pelican. Four Warthogs were waiting for them. Johnson jumped into the driver's seat and waited for John, the Arbiter and another Marine - Private Masterson- to get into the vehicle before pressing the gas.

John heard the other Warthogs' engines following closely behind them. The ride across the barren structure was swift, courtesy of Johnson's lead foot. In less than five minutes, they had reached their destination.

The Spartan took the lead as the soldiers around him disembarked from the Warthogs. As he approached the building, he hesitated slightly. His sensors were detecting nearly twenty life signs in the building. They were outnumbered and, most likely, outgunned.

"Something wrong, Chief?" Johnson asked, matching John's stride.

It still managed to surprise John at how quickly Johnson learned to detect the emotions behind the helmet. A subtle shift in the Spartan's actions perked the sergeant's ability to know that something wasn't quite right.

"I'm detecting about two dozen hostiles in there."

Johnson let out a hearty laugh. "Damn, and here I thought this was going to be a difficult mission."

"We will be victorious. Whatever those vermin are doing...we will stop them," the Arbiter replied.

"Now that's the kind of positive thinking that we need," retorted Johnson. "Don't worry, Chief, this is going to be easier than the first day of basic training."

"Cortana," John said, opening a private channel, "Do you know what's going on in there?"

"Not as much as I would like," she replied. "I'm detecting about a dozen Brutes, a handful of Jackals and a couple of Grunts. But, there are a few other life signs that are very faint. I can't access their information yet. This system is more difficult to infiltrate than I thought. If I find anything else, I'll let you know."

"Understood," John said, taking a step towards the building.

"Be careful, John. There is something in there that has their interest and it's not the Key," Cortana warned.

Then what were the last of the Covenant hoping to find?

John nodded his head forward and gestured for three of the soldiers to stand guard at the front of the entrance. The rest of them followed the Spartan inside the giant building. As the doors slid apart, John carefully entered, looking for any proximity mines that the Covenant might have hidden in the corridor.

When he was confident that there was no threat, he led the men down the narrow, yet tall, passageways that were reminiscent of the Halo rings. Several minutes passed as they made their way to the location that Cortana had marked.

At the end of the hall, there was a pair of blast doors. Beyond those, the large group of Covenant were there. In an ideal situation, John would have asked Cortana for another route, but time was not on their side. They needed to learn what had the Covenant's interest.

With a determined step, he approached the doors which obligingly separated for him. Without hesitation, he threw in three plasma grenades into the room and ducked back behind the wall. He waited for them to detonate and then, along with the others, stormed the room.

There was a Brute, bloodied and furious, charging at him. He raised his rifle and unleashed a barrage of bullets. Despite hitting its mark, the Brute kept charging forward. John aimed slightly higher and shot three shots directly into his skull.

Seconds later, the Brute slumped forward, no longer a threat.

The Elites and Marines had their hands full with the surviving

Covenant. John took a flanking position and picked off the Grunts before they could charge at his team with active plasma grenades in their hands. He watched as the Arbiter made quick work of two Brutes, stabbing them in the stomach with his ever-present plasma sword.

Whatever they were protecting, it was very important to the Brutes in front of them. He loaded a new clip and started shooting at the Covenant who were still alive. Suddenly, John noticed several dozen new targets at the far end of the room on his radar. He lifted his rifle and took aim.

"That's me. I finally managed to activate the security grid," Cortana's voice cut through the sounds of gunshots and grenades. "I thought you guys might like a little help."

John watched as the Sentinels started shooting at the remaining Covenant in the room. The Marines and Elites fell back as the Forerunner machines disposed of the remaining threat.

"Tell Cortana thank you," Johnson said from across the room with a cocky grin.

When the last Brute fell, John walked up to the large rectangular cubes that were standing in the middle of the room. Whatever it was, there was no question that this was what the Covenant were trying to protect.

As he looked up at the top of the unit, he froze.

Staring back at him, frozen in time, was Truth, the Prophet of the Covenant.

## 15. Shock and Awe

**\*\*Er, yeah, I thought I posted this a couple of weeks ago. Oops. Well, here's a long chapter for the wait. Expect more frequent updates, I promise. :D Disclaimers and info in Part 1.\*\***

**\* \* \***

><p>Cortana was soaring.<p>

Despite the fact that accessing the Forerunner system was proving to be as difficult as Bias had claimed it was going to be, Cortana was still entrenched in new data for her to devour. Data that hadn't been accessed in a hundred thousand years were at her fingertips.

Information about the Forerunners, their Installations, their history, their flaws and strengths, were waiting for Cortana to consume.

For now, the data was a steady trickle of knowledge. Cortana was peeling back layers and layers of code, getting more access to the ancient base. She already had partial access to the security systems; the Sentinels were under her command.

Still, most of the secured systems, including the Key and the purpose

of the building John was in, remained elusive to the AI.

Now that the Sentinels had been unleashed, she quickly burrowed herself into the trillions of lines of code in front of her and started unraveling, line by line, the firewalls and encryption the system was throwing her way. Thanks to her new algorithm, she could sift through the encryption with much more ease; a hack that normally took several minutes took a fraction of the time.

However, the Forerunners had encrypted the encryptions several times over, which made Cortana's job that much more difficult.

She didn't mind the challenge though. It felt incredible to be able to go back to doing what she did best without the limitations of rampancy affecting her.

"\_Cortana\_."

Instantly, she knew there was something wrong. John's one word carried a myriad of emotions. Immediately, Cortana spun off several subroutines to keeping decrypting the information while she turned her focus to the Spartan.

"Yes, Chief?" she asked, purposely keeping her voice light. There was no reason to advertise the fact she knew something wasn't right.

She established a long distance uplink with his armor, allowing her to see what he saw and hear what he heard. When it did, she couldn't hold back a gasp. The Prophet of Truth was silently staring back at them.

"Well, that would explain what got the Covenant's attention," she commented sardonically.

"\_How is this possible\_?"

She frowned. How was that possible? Suddenly, the Key became secondary as she started scrambling to look for the files that entailed, exactly, the purpose of the building. She weaved through irrelevant data, looking for the files she needed to figure out how Truth was there, despite being killed by the Gravemind on the Ark.

"That would explain the faint life signs I detected," she muttered. "As much as I hate to admit it, I don't know how he got here, Chief. I'm attempting to decrypt the data, but it doesn't seem as though the Forerunners wanted anyone to know about their side project."

"\_Do you think Bias knew about it\_?"

She considered his question for a second. "I doubt it. From what I do know about this installation, the Forerunners created it after he defected to the Gravemind."

"\_Chief\_." She heard Johnson's voice. "\_You need to look at this.\_"

Cortana's uneasiness grew. She had never heard the sergeant sound so shaken.



Catherine pushed away from the computer, frowning deeply. Miranda was there? But how was that even possible? The Shadow of Intent had brought her body back to earth before John had activated the Halo ring.

"You know."

She shouldn't have been surprised that Jacob came to her. It wasn't his decision for her to leave him and Miranda the way she did. He probably thought that there was some chance the three of them would be some kind of family, she thought wryly.

"Cortana's not the only one who knows how to eavesdrop," she said curtly.

"I want you to come to the surface with me."

She shook her head. "I need to stay here. I can monitor the progress from here best." It was a lie, but she did not want to open herself to feelings of remorse and regret. Regardless of John's discovery, there was still an objective to complete.

Jacob moved to stand in front of her, crossing his arms. "She's your daughter!"

"We don't know what's down there, Jacob. Miranda's body was brought home weeks ago. That isn't her." She swallowed. "And even if somehow it is, it doesn't matter. I gave that right up a long time ago."

"Dammit, Catherine. If you can't do it out of a maternal love, then do it for the sake of the UNSC. If it was any other soldier, wouldn't you be there?" he demanded. Before she could respond, he shook his head. "Just forget it. We both know where your loyalty lies when it comes to commitment."

He ran a hand through his short hair. "We could never compare to your Spartans."

She closed her eyes briefly at the true words he hurled at her. Yes, the Spartans had taken precedence over a family. She would have thought that Jacob of all people, knowing what he did about the program, would have understood why she made the decision she had so many years ago.

"\_Doctor Halsey\_."

Cortana's voice interrupted the two former lovers.

Catherine didn't break her angry stare as she tapped the control on the computer. "Go ahead."

"\_You need to come to the surface, Doctor\_."

"If this is about Commander Keyes--"

"\_It's not\_," the AI interrupted. "\_I think the Chief might have found a Forerunner in another stasis pod. If I'm deciphering the data correctly -and there's no reason why I wouldn't be - I believe it is possible to revive him from status\_."

Three seconds passed as Catherine considered the AI's words. If that was true, then they could have a direct resource to the artifacts that were scattered throughout the galaxy. They could pick up the Forerunner handle as they intended for them to do.

"I'm on my way."

She ignored Jacob's triumphant look as she scooped up her tablet. It may not have been under the conditions that he wanted, but there was no question that the man in front of her was smug at the fact that she would be forced to accompany him to the Hive.

The twenty minute trip was awkward and silent. Jacob kept his focus on the controls while Catherine did not look away from her tablet until the transport landed. She looked up and out the small window. John stood waiting at the front of the large doors.

Catherine allowed Jacob to step off the ship first and she followed behind him. "Sir, ma'am," John greeted as they approached the structure.

Jacob wasn't in the mood for pleasantries. "Does Cortana have any idea how this happened, Chief?"

He hesitated slightly. "She has a theory, sir, but she wants to tell the two of you directly." The doors slid open, granting them entrance.

Catherine watched as Jacob pressed his lips together in annoyance. He was a brilliant captain, a dedicated soldier, but she knew how impatient he could be. "What is her progress with the Key?" she asked, changing subjects.

"She almost has it, ma'am. Once she knows what to do with the pods, she will be able to focus on getting the Key so we can head back to Earth," John answered.

The blast doors slid apart. Blood and carnage covered the floors and walls, despite the fact that someone had taken the time to drag the fallen Covenant soldiers to the far corner of the room.

"This way," John said, nodding to where the dozen of soldiers, both UNSC and Separatists, were standing.

As they approached the area where the large pods were, Cortana appeared from a nearby holotank. "I take it you didn't spill the beans?"

He shook his head.

"Cortana," Keyes said, not taking his eyes from Miranda who appeared to be frozen in time, "how is she here?"

"From what I have been able to ascertain, this," she said, gesturing to the pods, "was another one of the Forerunners' defense against the Flood. The Ark was always intended to act as a holding vessel for the Forerunners while the Halo array was activated. Then, after the Flood starved themselves, they would leave the Ark and populate the Halo rings.

"If, however, a Flood presence was detected on the Ark, then the resurrection protocol was put into effect. Any non-flood life forms would be cloned and sent here, to the Hive until the survivors came to free them from the stasis," Cortana explained.

He pulled his gaze from Miranda to look at the AI. "Why didn't Bias mention this to us before we left?"

Cortana shrugged. "Most likely, this was implemented after he defected to the Flood. From what I can get from the files, this was a last minute plan thought up when they realized that they were fighting a losing battle."

"Then why is he here?" Catherine said, walking up to the Forerunner, frozen in the amber-colored substance.

"I'm assuming he's a guinea pig. The only name he's referenced as is the Subject."

"Can they be revived?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't advise doing it here. Their life signs are thready, especially the Forerunner's. If we are to remove them from their stasis pods, it would be best to do it under controlled situations," Cortana said. "Lucky for us, the pods are transportable."

A hiss sounded as the pod unlatched from its casing.

"Each unit is separately powered and monitored. Even if they aren't plugged into a power source, I would estimate that there is enough power to keep them alive for two months, if not longer," Cortana said.

"Earth needs to know," Keyes muttered from the side of Catherine. He raised his hand slowly, pressing it against the glass-like material close to Miranda's cheek. He turned to the Marines. "I want all of these pods aboard the Light."

He spun on his heel and faced Cortana. "Focus on getting the Key. I want to return to Earth as soon as possible." Keyes nodded to the Chief. "Make your way back to the control center. When Cortana's finished, the two of you need to return to the Light."

"Yes, sir."

Catherine watched as John walked out of the room. When the doors closed behind him, she allowed herself to openly look at the young woman who was frozen in time. Could it really be Miranda? Could she have a second chance at life?

Before she was able to get too emotional, her view of Miranda was obscured by the Arbiter. "The Separatists would appreciate the presentation of Truth's body as a token of our alliance between our people."

"Talk to High Command about it," Keyes replied. "I don't care what happens to him as long as he is never revived, but that's not my decision to make."



"I can assure you that both of our peoples are in agreement about the Prophet's future," the Arbiter assured him. "Then, allow my men and me to stay with the pod that holds Truth and travel with you back to earth," the Arbiter replied, snarling at Truth. "I believe your 'High Command' will appreciate our mutual hatred for Truth."

Keyes nodded. "All right." He looked up to Johnson who was hovering by Miranda's capsule. "Johnson, you and your men start taking Truth's pod to the Pelican."

"Yes, sir." Catherine didn't miss the pained glance he threw in Miranda's direction before turning towards Truth. It took three Elites to lift the enormous pod from its position. Johnson took point while the Arbiter brought up the rear.

Catherine walked away from Miranda and made her way to the reason why Cortana had called her to the surface in the first place: the Forerunner. Cortana appeared in the holotank closet to the doctor. "I can't be sure if this really is a Forerunner, but I would say that the odds are better than not that you are, in fact, looking at someone who is one hundred thousand years old."

The doctor peered through the amber colored material. Whoever it was, they entered this state in some kind of armor, giving her no clue as to what the ancient creature looked like. "High Command is going to have a field day with this," she muttered.

Cortana nodded. "If we can get him revived," she pointedly reminded her.

"Of course," she said before turning away.

Jacob was still standing by Miranda when she approached him.

"Is Cortana right? Can we save Miranda?" The hope was unmistakable.

"There's no reason to think that she is incorrect in her assessment, but until we get back to Earth, we won't know, Jacob," Catherine said. "I'm not going to remove anyone out of stasis until I am certain they will survive the process."

"Thank you, Catherine."

His voice was sincere. His hope was painfully evident. His trust was completely invested in her abilities. She gently placed her hand on his arm. "You're welcome, Jacob."

## 16. What's This Knife Doing in My Back?

\*\*As always, thanks for following along for the ride. :D Disclaimers and notes in Part 1.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Johnson was itching for a cigar. Or two.<p>

If he had thought things were perturbing during the hijacking of the

Light and Cortana's subsequent miraculous recovery from Rampancy, it paled to the tidal waves of emotion running through him now.

Truth was alive. And so was Miranda Keyes.

He led the team of six Marines and two Elites down the long corridor as he did his best to suppress his emotions concerning his discovery. He forced himself to focus on the granite colored walls that reached high towards the heavens. He drew in a deep breath as the pungent smell of plasma and metal-the scent of Elites- hit his nostrils.

Still it wasn't enough to keep the haunting memories away from the sergeant. He swallowed thickly as he recalled his broken confession to Keyes that Miranda had died while he had been able to do nothing as that bastard Brute killed her.

"\_I failed you, sir. I failed myself. But worst of all, I failed Miranda\_."

It had been raining on Earth that day.

Keyes, for his part, held no ill will towards Johnson; the sergeant had been punishing himself enough.

Johnson allowed a brief glimmer of hope that Doctor Halsey would be able to awaken Miranda from the stasis and she would be alive and well, ready to go wherever the fight led as she had always been. But, he thought with a frown, if she could be revived then Truth could also come back from the Great Beyond.

It seemed like Fate still was one sadistic SOB.

Johnson sighed as he tightened his hold of the pod as they stepped through the door to the outside. In the distance, he could barely make out the shape of the Warthog the Chief back to the main structure.

\_Good\_, Johnson thought. The sooner they could load the pods and get everyone back aboard the \_Light\_, the better. The entire mission had moved a bit too smoothly for his liking.

Several hundred yards ahead of them he saw a Pelican-the one the captain had piloted to the surface, he assumed-and a couple of Phantoms courtesy of the Arbiter.

He gave a sidelong glance at the Arbiter who looked more upset than he had been when Johnson had first met him, if that was possible. "Why are you acting like ya got a bee in your bonnet?" he finally asked.

The Arbiter considered him for a second before answering. "Truth's reappearance cannot be discovered. If it were to be known, the Loyalists would seize on the information and use it to rebuild the Covenant."

Johnson notice the Elite standing next to the Arbiter, looking at him anxiously. Two jumpy Elites were enough to make Johnson feel nervous himself.

"This is some sort of clone, Cortana said so herself." He shook his head adamantly. "He's no Messiah."

"Others will not be so easily convinced, Sergeant. He was dead, now his body is here." He snarled. "We should destroy this here. Now."

Johnson bristled at his suggestion. The Elites had a running record of destroying things because it caused problems to their agenda, whether it was glassing planets or murdering millions of innocents on nonmilitary installations. True, their two peoples had come together to destroy the Ark but Johnson knew true peace between humans and Sangheili would be a long time coming.

The longing for a cigar came back on full force. "High Command isn't gonna let him be revived if that's what you're worried about. We've got twenty-three billion more reasons to hate him more than you," he pointedly reminded him.

The Arbiter stiffened at his harsh words and the Elite beside him bristled but Johnson felt no remorse. If they didn't want to be reminded of what they did-regardless of the lies the Prophets told them-that was just too damn bad.

Tension swirled around them. Even with his back to them, Johnson knew the Marines were ready to pull out their weapons, tentative truce or no, if they sensed any trouble from the Arbiter or his Elite friend.

Five seconds passed. Then another. And another.

Finally, the Arbiter spoke. "I would not be so quick to assume that you understand how deep our hate for Truth runs. If something were to happen-

"Nothin' gonna happen once we get this back to the Light. In case you missed the big ass Forerunner ship when you entered the system, the Covenant vessels don't stand a chance against us. We'll get the pod on board and then we'll go to Earth. You can talk to Lord Hood to your heart's content. After we get there," Johnson said as they were nearing a Phantom.

"No."

It wasn't the Arbiter who spoke, but the Elite who was standing next to him.

Johnson amended his earlier assessment of the Elite. He wasn't nervous. He was twitchy.

They stopped walking as the Arbiter faced his comrade. "We will do as the humans have requested. If it was not for their construct's discovery, we would have never know about Truth. We will insure that he never comes into power again."

The Elite snarled. "You are wrong, Vadam. You have been wrong since you took the mantle of being the Arbiter. Truth succeeded in his Great Journey. It was you who allowed the Demon to destroy our path to follow him."

A sinking feeling settled into Johnson's gut. Oh yeah, some heavy crap was about to go down.

Johnson reached for his assault rifle and heard the soldiers behind him do the same. The Arbiter began to activate his light sword, but he was unable to move fast enough. The other Elite slammed his fist into the Arbiter's jaw before grabbing the base of his unactivated sword and smashing it against his forehead.

"You will pay for your treason. You will die at the hand of Truth," he roared before lifting his gaze at the seven standing humans.

They were too close for Johnson's liking for a firefight. "Fall back!" Johnson ordered as he gave his men suppressive fire. He aimed in the direction of the Elite, but it was as good as taking a shot in the dark; the Sangheili had already activated his active camo.

He sprinted to take cover behind the Phantom, which was still over a dozen yards away. It might as well been a mile with the Elite's location being unknown.

"We need help up here," Johnson said through his comm channel. A plasma bolt flew over his head and hit one of the Marines. He turned around and fired his weapon aimlessly, hoping to hit the Elite.

As he spun back towards the Phantom he saw Major Hillston come from behind the Phantom to throw a plasma grenade.

Johnson frowned. "Didn't you hear me, Marine? I said fall-"

The major crumpled forward as two plasma shots hit him square in the chest.

"Damn it," Johnson shouted. \_Just one more dead hero, \_he thought bitterly.

There would be time for mourning later. Now, Johnson had to focus on surviving long enough to make sure the pod holding Truth wasn't taken. He ducked as he heard the plasma rifle fire another shot.

He opened his comm channel again hoping Cortana or Keyes would be able to understand his words over the sounds of the firefight. "One of the Arbiter's buddies decided to turn on him. I've got a feeling he's gonna try to take Truth's pod." He swallowed as he ran past the fallen body of Lieutenant Dixon. "I don't know how much longer we can hold him off. I've already got four soldiers down and I-"

An explosion of stars filled his vision. His rifle fell, clattering on the ground. Pain roared through the back of his skull, but he forced himself to stay conscious. He dropped to his knees, attempting to look at his attacker. Though his eyesight was blurry, Johnson didn't miss the snarl on the Elite's face as he deactivated his camo.

The blackness was increasing; Johnson knew he wouldn't be able to fight off the darkness much longer. As he dropped onto his back, he forced out, "Why...not kill me?"

The Elite's laugh was without humor. "Truth has some unfinished business with you too, Vermin."

## 17. Did Someone Call For Backup?

**\*\*As always, thanks for following along for the ride. :D Disclaimers and notes in Part 1.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Truth wasn't dead.<p>

Despite the discovery of Miranda's stasis pod, John kept coming back to that one reality. He hadn't missed the disgust on the Arbiter's face when he showed him the former prophet, staring at them through the mysterious amber-colored resin.

He trusted High Command to do whatever it took to insure that the prophet would never be revived from his status state. It was out of his hands now; he needed to focus on getting Cortana -and the Key- back to the Light.

As he stepped off the lift, Cortana activated her avatar from the control panel. It still took John a second to adjust to the bright purple color that she emanated. The calculations whizzed across her body. It was a stark contrast to how she had been after her initial encounter with Bias.

"You didn't pick up any Monitors this time," she noted with a smirk.

He approached the control panel. "I learned my lesson after Spark," he replied. "You're the only AI I trust."

She rose her eyebrow, but didn't call him on his overt compliment. In fact, if the slight burst of pink was any indication, John would have thought she was embarrassed by his statement. "Did you get it?" he asked, shifting topics.

She smiled triumphantly and held her hand out. A small floating holographic key, similar-looking to an ancient skeleton key, hovered over her right hand. "Did you doubt me?"

"Never."

A coy smile passed over her lips. "My, someone is in an-" She stopped unexpectedly, her eyes widening.

"Cortana?"

Less than a second later, he heard Johnson's voice cut through his comm channel. "We need help up here."

Then the comm channel went quiet. "What's happened?" John asked Cortana.

"Apparently one of your buddy's right hand men decided to flip on the Separatists and has stolen Truth's pod," Cortana explained quickly.

He reached over to the holotank and ejected the chip. He reached

around and slid her chip into the slot and allowed Cortana to transfer herself back into his armor. Once the vertigo passed, John sprinted to the gravlift.

"How did this happen?"

She sighed. "According to the video feed from Major Hillston, when they got out of the building, one of the Elites started acting strange. He and the Arbiter got into a bit of a debate and before anyone knew it, he had knocked the Arbiter out and started attacking Johnson and his men."

John gritted his teeth as he willed the lift to go faster.

"I'm accessing the live feed from the Hive's security grid." She paused. "It doesn't look too good, John."

"Johnson?" He stepped off the lift and ran towards the large doors at the end of the corridor.

"Alive. For now. He and Major Hillston are the only one still standing. I've already for the Harbinger ready to take out anything leaving the atmosphere."

"Good." He jumped into the Warthog and pressed the pedal as hard as he could. From this distance, John couldn't see what was going on. He hated being out of the loop.

"Major Hillston...he didn't make it," Cortana reported forlornly. "Johnson is the only one is alive. We need to hurry, Chief!"

Though he itched to pull out his assault rifle, John knew from this distance that hitting the rebel Elite would be nearly impossible, even for him. The two figures were pinpoints on the horizon. He continued to navigate to Johnson's position.

Cortana patched the Hive's video feed into John's HUD. In the corner, he watched as the invisible Elite attacked Johnson, causing him to fall on his knees. He was speaking to the Sergeant, but the feed had no audio so John couldn't tell what was being said. Then, the Elite did something unexpected.

He walked away from Johnson.

"He didn't kill him?" John asked as he sped towards the Phantom.

"Apparently not..." Cortana sounded as confused as he felt. She terminated the video feed as they got close enough to where John could see what was going on.

Feeling confident in his proximity to the Elite, John raised his rifle and took aim at the fleeing traitor. He unleashed a three round burst which hit its mark.

The Elite howled in pain, but continued to move the pod onto the Phantom.

John ran forward as a dozen Separatist soldiers and Keyes came rushing out the building, guns drawn.

"Take him down!" Keyes shouted.

They fired at the Phantom, but the Elite had enough of a head start to where he was able to activate the docking ramp once he had finished pushing the pod on board. Instinctively, John sprinted for the Phantom. As the ship lifted off the ground, John leapt and grabbed a hold of the Phantom's bay door as it was about to shut completely.

The closing mechanism whirred in effort as it tried to overpower to gravitational pull of an unexpected half-ton Spartan pulling on it. After ten long seconds, the door lost its battle and started slipping open as the Phantom continued to rise.

John attempted to pull himself onto the fleeing ship, but the Elite intercepted him. He slammed his foot on John's hand, crushing his fingers.

John still held on.

"You truly are the Demon," the Elite marveled, looking down at John. "But not is the time for the Prophet to rise. You will no longer stand in the way of the Great Journey."

Then, without warning, he lifted up his foot and kick John square in his helmet.

Unable to keep hold of the door, John plummeted back towards the ground.

The Hive came rushing towards them. He spun widely in the air from the impact of the kick.

"I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you that I'm scared of heights," Cortana quipped.

The tiny dots on the ground were now morphing into distinguishable figures. It wouldn't take long for the impact; John only hoped that his armor would protect him as it had in the past.

"Cortana, I-"

Then there was darkness.

## 18. Come Out, Wherever You Are

\*\*As always, thanks for following along for the ride. :D Disclaimers and notes in Part 1.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Cortana didn't have much hope as the two of them plummeted into the ground.<p>

For three full seconds, she couldn't get any readings from the armor. When she finally was able to access the data, it wasn't good; John's vitals were thready after the powerful impact. He had lost consciousness, broken several bones and a dislocated shoulder. The

biofoam went to work, but she knew that he would be lucky to move on his own power anytime soon.

Despite her concern for John, she had other, potentially galaxy-devastating events to deal with. If the Covenant got their hands on Truth's pod, there would be no way to guess how revitalized they would be. And Earth was too weak to wage another war with them.

The Harbinger was ready to shoot down the Pelican as soon as it exited the atmosphere, but the Covenant had other plans. Cortana detected another three Cruisers that had not been there when they first entered the system. As the rogue vessel left the atmosphere, they released several thousand Ghosts and Phantoms in space, making a direct hit impossible. The Separatists' ships were being infiltrated with some kind of virus that the Loyalists seemed to have uploaded to their systems. They were unable to use any of their weapons or propulsion systems. They were sitting ducks for the Loyalists but, fortunately for them, the Covenant were busy trying to protect their prize.

She needed to get back on board the Light.

Her subroutines ran another vital scan of John; he would survive but there was no telling how long he would remain unconscious. She opened a comm channel to Keyes. "Sir, I need to get back on board. The Covenant are putting up more of a fight than anticipated."

"I'll escort you back, Cortana." Keyes' voice cut through the channel. "Catherine needs to stay here with Johnson and the Chief."

"But, what about Miranda, sir?"

"I trust that she's in good hands."

Cortana prepared her subroutines for transferring out of John's armor. "All right. Yank me."

To her surprise, John reached up and blocked the captain's hand. "Permission to escort Cortana myself, sir."

She didn't miss the slight slur to his voice.

Neither did Keyes.

"Negative, Chief. Who knows the injuries you sustained during the fall?" Keyes replied. He shook his head. "Doctor Halsey will keep an eye on you here."

As John moved to stand, Cortana knew some of that stubbornness that allowed him to escape impossible scenarios was about to show itself. "That won't be necessary, sir," he countered.

Keyes looked at him for a second.

Cortana didn't like the latest information coming from the ship scans. "Do I need to remind everyone that if Truth escapes that we will probably be fighting another war?" she said pointedly. To Keyes she said, "I've worked with the Chief under worse circumstances." Or



at least she thought she had; specific details about his vitals during the first Halo campaign were lacking. "I wouldn't risk my well-being if I didn't trust him to be alright."

Keyes looked at Catherine who gave a half-shrug. "I think John knows his own limits better than anyone."

Keyes sighed but nodded. "Go ahead, Chief."

"We need to use your Pelican to get back to the ship, sir."

He nodded curtly. "Permission granted. You do what it takes to get that ship down," Keyes said. "Good luck, Chief. You too, Cortana."

With a quick glance at Johnson and the Arbiter, neither of which had regained consciousness, John turned away and boarded the Pelican. He wasted no time to transfer Cortana to the Pelican controls. She activated her avatar. "I hope you're in the mood for a ride because something tells me this is going to be a bumpy trip," she warned.

That turned out to be an understatement.

As soon as they exited the atmosphere, two Cruisers shot at the Pelican. The ship shook violently, but the reinforced bulkhead held.

Cortana was still monitoring the Phantom's position, but, despite its vast firepower, the Harbinger had been unable to pinpoint an exact shot.

"Hang on," she said, pulling the ship hard to the right. The inertial dampeners proved virtually ineffective as the force of her dangerous move threw John across the cabin. A quick check of his vitals proved that he was still conscious.

"You alright?" she asked as John pulled himself to a sitting position.

He seemed to study her for a second before replying. "Maybe I should have let Keyes take you back on board."

John's sense of humor did have the oddest times of appearing, she noted.

She spun the ship around and weaved between the giant vessels. What the Pelican lacked in firepower, it made up for with maneuverability. She piloted the Pelican away from the Separatists ships which were unable to do anything other than take the shots the Cruisers were firing.

Cortana knew she needed to decrypt the jamming signal so they could defend themselves. She infiltrated the Covenant battle network and found the obtrusive code. Line by line, she began to delete the file.

Meanwhile, her subroutines were busy tracking the Phantom where Truth was. It was slowly and steadily making its way to the Cruiser closest to the planet's atmosphere. Cortana fired the Pelican's chain gun,

but the bullets bounced off the superior ship's shielding.

She considered her options. She could easily destroy the remaining battlecruisers with the \_Harbinger\_'s weapon systems, but the debris field would be so dense, it would be nearly impossible for her to track the movement of the Phantom. She needed to make sure they were able to track the Phantom's location in the midst of the chaos.

Cortana turned to John. "When we get docked, you need to transfer me to the \_Light\_'s systems immediately."

He cocked his head to the side. "You're not going on the \_Harbinger\_?"

Logically, going to the Forerunner ship made sense. The ship was superior to the \_Light\_ in every way but one. She was still adapting to the Forerunner systems; her subroutines instinctively knew the UNSC systems better. "Not this time, Chief."

She barely had time to set the Pelican on the ground before John ejected her chip and transferred her into the \_Light\_'s main systems. She had extended the \_Harbinger\_'s shields around the \_Light\_. Wasting no time, she accessed the data from the defense systems of the Forerunner vessel. So far the shields were holding; the \_Harbinger\_ was doing its job protecting the \_Light\_.

Satisfied with their protection, she transferred her avatar to the bridge. Quickly, she apprised the crew of their situation.

John walked onto the bridge and looked at Cortana questioningly.

She shook her head. "No luck so far. I'm still trying to disrupt the jamming signal which means the Separatists are still out there like sitting ducks." She put a hand on her hip.

John nodded and looked around. "Who's in command?"

The bridge crew exchanged a look with each other.

"Actually, Chief, you are the highest ranking officer on the bridge which would make you in charge," Cortana replied, not having the time to fully appreciate the awkward situation he was in. John was used to receiving orders, not giving them on a vessel.

He shifted slightly. "\_I don't think Keyes intended to leave me in command of the \_Light\_," he said via a private comm.

"I don't think he intended on an Elite hijacking the pod that held Truth either, but that's what happened," Cortana replied. "Don't worry, Chief. I've got things under control."

Another shot rocked the cabin.

"Well, mostly," she muttered.

She fired a volley of shots from the \_Harbinger\_ and took out the plasma canons on two of the cruisers. She continued firing as she weaved through the Separatists signal and found the source jamming signal.

With a defiant push, she grabbed the code and erased it line by line herself. Finally, with a healthy dose of stubbornness and determination, she managed delete the signal. She opened a comm channel to the Separatists. "Your weapon systems are back online. I'm uploading Truth's coordinates to you now."

"Understood," the ship master replied.

She concentrated on hitting the tiny target in the middle of the zero-gee battleground. Finally, the Phantom moved into a position where she could hit it. There were several Ghosts in the vicinity, but she was confident she could still destroy the vessel with Truth's pod.

Together, the ships launched a volley of shots at the well-protected Phantom. Their combined efforts connected with the engines. The hijacked vessel started spinning wildly before it exploded in a burst of fire and debris.

But, to her surprise, the ship's sensors still detected the unique energy signature of the pod that held Truth's cloned body.

They had been outplayed, she recognized with a sickening realization.

She quickly pulled up the footage from the \_Light\_'s sensors. There. Moments before the \_Harbinger\_ and the Separatist ships shot the Phantom, a "disabled" Ghost approached the vessel. It must have been there that the switch had been made and Truth's pod transferred to a different location without her knowledge.

Cortana would have considered the move brilliant if she had thought of it herself. Inwardly, she cursed.

The Ghost had managed to dock onto the Cruiser and Truth's pod was protected in the superior shielding of the larger vessel. Still, she had to take a chance that there was still time to stop Truth from slipping away.

"The pod's location has changed," she said to the shipmaster on the Shadow of Intent. "Uploading new coordinates."

Together, they fired a barrage of bullets and plasma, but the Cruiser had an enormous head start over them. The \_Shadow of Intent\_ moved to follow the Loyalist Ship, but the another Cruiser fired its plasma cannons at it. Cortana targeted the ship with the \_Harbinger\_'s cannons.

Another shot rocked the cabin. "We've lost artificial atmosphere in decks 17-19," announced Ensign Paulson.

"Cortana?" John asked, concerned. She knew he hated feeling so helpless, being stuck on the bridge of a ship, watching the action instead of taking a more active role.

"Sealing the decks off. Firing the \_Harbinger\_'s cannons now," she said, as she pushed the engines past their normal operating levels. That ship was not going to go anywhere.

She felt a wave of satisfaction when hit their target. Their shields faltered. All it would take it one more shot and the ship's slipspace engines would be disabled.

But, the Loyalists had another plan in mind. The other ships, crippled or not, started moving in a formation blocking the Separatists and the Harbinger from hitting their target. The Separatists fired simultaneously at the intrusive targets.

It, however, was pointless.

Cortana frowned as she detected a slipspace bubble being created.

She watched it disappear as the ship blinked out of sight.

Truth was gone.

## 19. Don't Make a Promise

**\*\*Well, we've hit the end of the road. A big thank you to everyone who followed along. I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I loved writing it. A few more author's notes are at the end. Disclaimers and notes in Part 1.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>It was the end of an era.<p>

Sixteen days had passed since Truth had slipped from their grasp. Twelve days had gone by since Doctor Halsey, working closely with Cortana, had managed to revive Miranda from her status pod. Two days had passed since Cortana piloted the Light and the newly commissioned Harbinger back to Earth.

And now, five minutes ago, John had received orders about his next mission. He looked down at the tablet that held his instructions for an assignment that he had personally requested with mixed feelings.

"You've received new orders."

John felt a wave of deja vu settle over him. Had it only been a month since he had said the same thing to her? He turned to look at Cortana who was standing with a hand on her hip and a smirk on her lips. He felt a wave of something like happiness at seeing her back to normal.

"It didn't take you long to read them," he noted.

"Well, I am the best UNSC AI for a reason," she replied cheekily. She crossed her arms and looked at him pointedly. "I assume that the rumors are true, that you petitioned for the mission yourself."

John nodded. "The Arbiter wants our help."

"He wants your help," corrected Cortana. "That's the only reason why The Shadow of Intent followed us back to earth. He needs you with him. The only thing that is more terrifying to the Covenant than

Truth is the Demon."

John knew she was right. And it was for that reason, with the threat of the Covenant rebuilding with the UNSC so weak, John volunteered to fight alongside the Arbiter. He had done it before and trusted the former Elite. But, there was another factor, a more difficult one, that he had to accept now that he had been given clearance to search for Truth.

Cortana would no longer be assigned to work with him.

"You're locking down the Halo rings." There was no question in his voice.

"You know I don't have a choice, John," she replied, frowning slightly. The holographic key suddenly hovered over her hand. "I have the Key and until all of the Halo rings are disabled, humanity, every life form in this galaxy is in danger."

"I know." Her commitment to protect people rivaled his own.

"Don't worry, Chief. I've got some good company with me," she assured him.

John agreed with her. The Harbinger was being used as a prototype for the newly formed alliance between the UNSC and the Separatists. The ship would have a crew consisting of officers from both forces. It was, according to Cortana, an olive branch extended to building up the tentative partnership between the two people. There would be at least one familiar face in the crew; Johnson had offered to join the crew when he was presented the option.

"I've already talked to Johnson," he admitted.

She let out a soft laugh. "I think I'm more than capable of taking care of myself, Chief." She smiled at him. "But your concern is appreciated."

She sat down, cross-legged, hovering over the holotank. "I'll miss you," she admitted softly.

This was usually the point in the conversation when John would tuck himself safely inside his emotional bunker, hiding from any significant feelings. But, after everything that had happened between the two of them throughout the course of the Halo campaign, he owed her more than that.

He strode across the room and knelt down to be eye-level with her. He leaned on his chin. "I'll miss you too," he rumbled.

"Of course you will. You're going to be stuck with the Arbiter for a while," she retorted, falling back on sarcasm. She looked thoughtful for a second. "Normally this would be the point of the conversation where I'd give you a handshake or," she said with a gleam in her eye, "a kiss on the cheek..."

John felt himself blush slightly at her suggestion.

"...but you'll just have to accept my sincere wish for luck."

"That's enough," he said seriously. He stood up and grabbed his helmet from the ground. "When I get finished with Truth, I'll put in my request to be assigned to the \_Harbinger\_."

Cortana raised an eyebrow as she pulled herself up into a standing position. "I would advise you against making impossible promises, but we both know how stubborn you are." She took a deep breath. She hated this goodbye as much as John did. With a resolute look, she said, "Good luck, John."

"Good luck, Cortana."

Then, she faded away.

John put the helmet on his head as he started making his way to the hangar where the Arbiter was waiting for him. He would find Truth. Cortana would lock down the Halo rings. Humanity would be safe from the Covenant threat.

He was ready to finish the fight. Again.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Yes, I do intend on writing a sequel to this story. (Actually, two.) But I don't have a timeframe in mind...muse willing, the second one will be finished this time next year. Again, thanks to all the readers! You are the best!<strong>

End  
file.